

Fantas Tales



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FIRST MAKE
THEM MAD

BY
ADRIAN COLE

A MAGAZINE OF THE WEIRD AND UNUSUAL

FANTASY TALES

Volume
2

CONTENTS FOR
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Number
4

FRONT COVER DESIGN	Jim Pitts	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "First Make Them Mad"</i>		
FIRST MAKE THEM MAD	Adrian Cole	2
<i>The Dark Gods send the enigmatic Voidal to Moonwater to oppose the plans of the Seven in this chilling new novelette</i>		
LOVE PHILTRE	H. Warner Munn	23
<i>Verse</i>		
THE CHINESE BOX	Ken Dickson	25
<i>A Chinese wizard's old box leads to a horror beyond time</i>		
MOURNING OF THE FOLLOWING DAY	Karl Edward Wagner	33
<i>Verse (c) 1976 Karl Edward Wagner for "Dark Crusade", reprinted by permission of the author</i>		
BLOODGOLD	Joe R. Schifino	34
<i>A beautiful woman involves Lupus Lupolius in a death feud</i>		
AT LAST THE ARCANIA REVEALED	A. J. Silvonijs	43
<i>A macabre story from an evening in the Midnight Court</i>		
MAUSOLEUM	Gordon Larkin	51
<i>Verse</i>		
THE CAULDRON		53
<i>The readers of this magazine express their opinions</i>		
TOMB-TIME	Steve Eng	55
<i>Verse</i>		
BACK COVER DESIGN	Simon Horsfall	

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STEPHEN JONES, *Editor.*

DAVID A. SUTTON, *Associate Editor.*

"He glimpsed himself in a pool. He was complete. A new hand had replaced...what?"

First Make Them Mad

By ADRIAN
COLE

THE
DREAMS
WERE
KIND

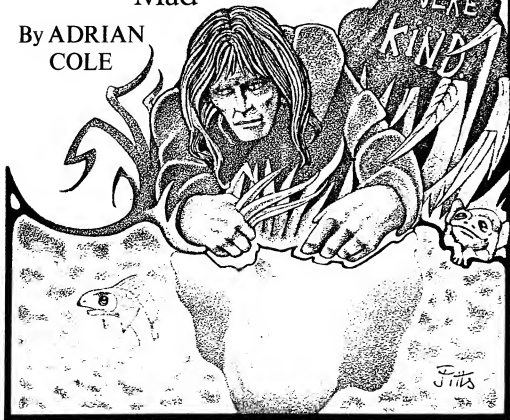


Illustration by JIM PITTS

No Dave
very best wishes
Adrian Cole

Adrian Cole's powerful story of the occult, *Scars*, was the lead story in our 2nd issue, but as the biographical notes that accompanied the story showed, the author works in several genres quite successfully. Lately he has published a SF/Black Humour story, *Axeman*, in *Penthouse* magazine (July 1978) and a horror yarn, *The Moon Web*, in Mary Danby's 11th *Fontana Book of Horror Stories*. A comic-book spoof, *Transmuto*, *The Metamorphic Myrmiden* appears in Michel Parry's anthology *Superheroes* from Sphere Books, and in complete contrast, Adrian had some children's limericks published last year and more appear in the November 1978 *Armada Book of Children's Limericks 2*. Also up-coming is a SF short in *Space 5*, edited by Richard Davis for Hutchinson: the story is called *Offside*. Adrian's new fantasy character, the 'Voidal', which we mentioned in *Fantasy Tales 2*, is the author's most important achievement of the short stories he has written. He has now sold nine in the series - that is, all those written thus far! We mentioned several of them in issue 2, but the Voidal's first paperback (as distinct from magazine) appearance will be *Astral Stray* in *Heroic Fantasy*, edited by Gerald Page for DAW Books in the USA. Also, the 10th anniversary issue of *Weirdbook* (number 13) carried *All Things Dark and Evil* as its lead yarn. Most of the other Voidal tales will be published this year if not already in print. Further tales are in progress and the author hopes eventually to collect them together for book publication. The story we present here is another of the Voidal's adventures (originally scheduled to appear in the now-defunct SF magazine *Vortex*), wherein is described the first meeting of the Voidal and Elfloq. In subsequent stories they team up in spite of the Dark Gods. We think our readers will be impressed with this highly original fantasy character, who is destined to become one of the recognised greats in the field of sword & sorcery fiction.

He came from the void, the dark place between the dimensions; he had no identity, no soul and his destiny was not his to forge. Once he had sinned against the Dark Gods and for his crime they had set him on an endless course - he was their pawn and their unwitting servant. By his right hand was he known as Fatecaster. In darkness he came. He was the Voidal.

IN PHAEDRABILE, obscure and most chaotic of dimensions, far from the walks of Reason, among the blazing embers of the Dryunic worlds where kingdoms and empires rose and fell meteorically in bloody, catastrophic tides, there came to power the Dynasty of the Csarducts, greatest of all the stellar empires of Phaedrable. It was the boast of these quasi-human tyrants, whose antecedents were known by the learned sorcerers of the Dryunic worlds to be a blasphemous mixture of human and elemental, that they would multiply like insects and spread like a plague throughout all the dimension of mad Phaedrable. Upon the decomposing clusters of Gnardril and Mandrax the Csarduct Dynasty

imposed its evil will, gripping easily the decaying detritus of such ancient cinder-worlds as Zubrix, Aagool and Ptolemydyne, heart of the star clusters that had seen so much destruction and damnation. To the neighbouring star cluster of galactic debris named Hlistro the Csarducts now turned with avaricious intent and from the bowels of the Dryunic worlds, the seat of their power, they schemed the acceleration of the conquest.

Deep in the midst of the glowing star embers of the Dryunic worlds, the minions of the Csarducts - their dreadful mages and sorcerers - schemed and plotted, calling upon demiurges and devils long plunged into the masking darkness of antiquity. Those ambitious sorcerers sought to plumb the very depths of their black arts, seeking to reincarnate old and forgotten gods and hideous powers that they might bind them to their own will and thus create a combined power that would sweep aside all opposing forces. There was no god, spirit or demon feared by the sorcerers of the Csarducts, and no power to which they bent the knee, save their overlords, the invincible

Csarducts.

At the hub of the Csarduct empire was the world of Moonwater. This huge planet, entirely coated in a phosphorescent ocean of living matter, harboured the great citadel of Quellermondel, which had been artificially grown from the green mooncoral of the planet's ocean over a period of countless millennia. Seven aquamarine moons outshone the Dryunic suns and looked ever down on Moonwater, where the bright ocean reflected in iridescent splendour the emerald glow of the heavens. Up from the curling, glittering glory of the mooncoral city the ragged towers of the sorcerers thrust like jagged spears seeking the moons; for each heavenly titan there was a tower, seven in all, and from the names of the seven moons the Seven sorcerers of the Csarducts took their names - Quar Mordo, Mage of Pain; Endellys, Mage of Dreams; Jundamar, Mage of Prophecy; Lucedrix, Mage of Knowledge; Quarramagus, Mage of Spells; Zomakh, Mage of Necromancy; Tephlemeytho, Mage of Immortality.

Moonwater hid them all from the prying eyes of the empire. High in their fantastical towers the sorcerers practised their outrageous mysteries, ever seeking paths into new discoveries, new powers. And the seven towers glowed and reverberated to strange energies as the Seven pursued their endless missions. Quellermondel had once been no more than a large outcrop of mooncoral, but over the centuries, coaxed by unnatural magics, had thrust ever upward towards the bright moons, defying laws of sanity, piling itself layer upon twisted layer, shelf upon leaning shelf, so that now its planes were countless, its walks twisting and turning through tunnels, over arches, across dizzy abysses, high, high upward, ever upward. Geometry and architecture were mocked by the bizarre pile.

As the mooncoral rose higher above the level of the phosphorescent sea, transmogrifying into a harder, more resilient rock form, the life within the city also changed, migrating upwards and mutating. Dwelling in the uppermost



"Up from the curling, glittering glory of the mooncoral city the ragged towers of the sorcerers thrust."

Tiers were the great Houses of the Csarducts and their principal acolytes, families and warriors. Below them in the Secondary Tiers were the mass of the city's inhabitants, servants of the rulers; below in the Tertiary Tiers were the low-born, those that still inter-bred with the lesser dwellers of the sea, who were undermen and who did the menial labours of the higher Tiers. In the underwater Weedcoves dwelt the strangest of the city's inhabitants; these were the amphibious Orgae, ocean dwellers who had once been masters of Moonwater, until the scions of the Csarducts had imposed upon them a cruel, unreversible slavery. Now these Orgae served as sea-harvesters and as helpless, jaded servants to the whims of all the Tiers of Quellermondel. Many were the indignities heaped upon these berated slaves.

While Quellermondel rose in majestic blasphemy towards the seven aquamarine moons, its submarine catacombs thronged with a race whose final destiny seemed to be a sliding downward to ruin and extinction. Far above them the rulers laughed; from far across their glowing empire they had come to Moonwater, seeking oracles and omens, for they prepared to launch their final offensive that would make all Phaadrabile their toy.

TWO figures, both small and squat, peculiarly batrachian in facial characteristics, dropped soundlessly upon an isolated arm of moon-coral, high up above the sleeping city of Quellermondel. Shadows crossed the seven moons, shadows that had been drawn by sorcerous fingers like veils, for there was undoubted evil abroad. In the twinkling glow of the distant ocean the two figures were limned like gargoyles, their scaly skin a deep green. Bulbous eyes reflected phosphorescent light from far below as the thick heads turned to study the shadows. They were alone. Satisfied, they drew together like conspirators.

"Not at your Master's side this night, Owlworm?" croaked the first, a hint of amusement about his

words.

"No, nor thee, Elfloq? There's sinister doings afoot," replied the other, pointing. His thin arm waved upward like a twisted stem of bone, singling out a high dome set above them, in the shadow of the rearing sorcerers' towers. From the few slit windows of the dome came faint, unnatural light; it had not shone from that cold place for many a long year. Too many black ghosts walked its echoing halls for comfort.

"There's strange deeds done when there's no place for we familiars," said Elfloq, scowling at the dome. "Quarramagus sent me from him long since with strict words that I shun him until summoned back. Most strange."

"Aye, and Zomakh likewise sent me hence," nodded Owlworm, tugging at his lip thoughtfully.

"The Seven have dredged from the forgotten annals of night many a filthy relic of lore ere now. Yet never before have they cast us out and dispensed with our aid. Are there deities, then, that we know nothing of, Owlworm?"

The familiar looked out over the sea. "You know as much as I. Who knows the extent of the Gods? Who can know the far reaches of their power?"

Elfloq grunted. He prided himself on his knowledge of the labyrinths of mystery that his master trod, and to be shut out from some new mystery irked him like a cold sliver of ice inside him. "So you are no wiser than I in this?"

Owlworm hawked and spat. "Even less, I would suspect, knowing your keenness of eye and ear for... detail."

"Oh, I know nothing," muttered Elfloq. So, he mused, Owlworm would be no help to him and his sounding out of the other five familiars had also been fruitless.

"There is one thing I did notice," Owlworm said casually, picking at his nose indifferently.

Elfloq tried not to appear piqued. "Yes?" He was always burning to hear any breath of gossip as his fellows well knew.

"Well," went on Owlworm. "The information is hardly priceless,

but at the same time it is not completely without value -"

Elfloq puckered his features sourly. "Tell me what you know and I will hang a price on it. Not before, my wily friend."

Owlworm snorted. "A small spell from your Master's trove will suffice -"

"First the tidbit," growled Elfloq.

"Very well. We are agreed that some new and dire conjuration is in progress," said Owlworm, again looking up at the dome with a noisy hawk.

"I'll not dispute that. The Seven have been preparing strong cantrips and spells these last nine cloudpasses. Binding spells, too. But this much we all know, having aided in the preparations."

"Well," went on Owlworm, enjoying his brief moment of power over his fellow, who so rarely needed enlightening on matters of news in the city. "I have sensed several ripples on the astral realm." He fell silent, allowing his words to hover as though weighted with awe.

Elfloq grimaced, unimpressed. "Ripples? But the astral is a cauldron of movement, perpetually. What ripples?"

"Most odd. They began not here, but distantly."

Elfloq nodded, biding his time patiently.

"Something," said Owlworm with feigned momentousness, "moves beyond. Beyond all the regions we know, beyond all the planes, real or astral. Something outside all experience."

"Yet there are other dimensions -" put in Elfloq.

"Whatever disturbs the astral sea with its ripples is not fettered by any dimensional barrier. There may be Old Gods awake. They watch."

Elfloq grunted, knowing that the supposed revelation was over. Yet it had served him to a degree. "You should be the prophet's familiar and not the necromancer's," he sniffed.

"Is my news of value?" said Owlworm.

Elfloq chuckled. "Arguably." He leaned over to his companion and

spoke softly into the tufted ear, reciting a simple spell for him.

"My thanks," said Owlworm. "So, I'll not linger. Will you join me elsewhere?"

"Not yet," said Elfloq with a shifty glance at the dome. Owlworm nodded, spitting, then spread his delicate, membranous wings and slipped away into the air and out of view. Elfloq remained on the arm of mooncoral, mulling over what he had heard. He was deeply disturbed, for the omens were decidedly unhealthy. Earlier he had conversed briefly with Dagwort, familiar of Jundamar, the Mage of Prophecy, trying to sound him out as to the potential of this conclave of sorcerers, but the tiny familiar had been tight-lipped and evidently far more distraught than he habitually was. No good would come of any of it, Elfloq deduced. But I would know more, he mused. I will see what I may. Then, like a wisp of air eddying up into the darkness, he flitted toward the great dome and to one of the slit-ted windows.

EACH of the Seven guarded his knowledge and powers jealously, sharing what various secrets he had hoarded in the name of the Csarduct Dynasty as infrequently as possible. They rarely met outside the hallowed halls of their overlords, the Csarduct families, who came and went on Moonwater and their other many worlds as they pleased. Yet now the Seven had come together, and after many long discussions and muted whisperings amongst themselves, had agreed to unite to perform one particular conjuration, more ambitious than any other previous working. It was to be the result of an eternity of scheming and surreptitious plotting, for the arm of their lords was long and there were few places where the shadow of the Csarducts did not fall. Furthermore, the conjuration that they planned required the combined sorcery of them all, for the dangers inherent in its performance were colossal. Yet if they were to succeed - and they must! - the Seven would usurp the Csarduct thrones and rule in their stead,



"Owlworm nodded, spitting, then spread his delicate membranous wings and slipped away into the air."

and all Phaedrable would bow to them, placing them above all other gods.

Jundamar, Mage of Prophecy, had hinted at the possibilities first, for he claimed to have foreseen the debacle of the Csarduct Dynasty; his tremulous, discreet revelation soon reached the ears of all the others and the meetings began. Lucedrix, Mage of Knowledge was consulted, and thereafter spent many wearying periods in his tower, searching for clues as to how the Seven could accelerate the downfall of their masters. The Csarducts had decided to come to Moonwater in force, seeking oracles. Lucedrix had then found a weapon, but fear made him caution his colleagues against its use. Yet Quarramagus, Mage of Spells, avowed that he could set up a barrier to bind the terrible weapon, if the others would aid him. And so they had gone beyond idle speculation.

Now, here inside the ancient dome, where once the arcane priests of the lowly Orgae had practised their unsavoury arts before being ousted, the Seven had gathered to begin their unholy rituals. Cloaked in grey, their faces smooth and devoid of features, blanked thus by certain of their own magics, the Seven had described for each of themselves a charmed circle; they now sat within them, surrounded by invisible guardians, focussing their wills and concentration upon the large pentacle that was the central point of the glittering floor. Around this pentacle the sorcerers had erected their strongest spells and incantations so that the air hung blackly like a wall of power, unbreakable. Thick magics hung like incense, and terrible sigils flickered like beads of light, stars spangling the smooth walls. While the Seven remained seated in their potent formation of circles, nothing could form and tear free from the central pentacle. All the combined sorcery they had gathered about them had never before been realised. Silence cloaked them as they concentrated. Nothing moved within the pentacle. Even the air there was still.

"Let the summoning begin," said the sonorous voice of Quarramagus, breaking the silence. "I have compounded the strength of our barrier. That which we invoke cannot break free."

"I have sown the air with the Incantations of Pain as set down by Nehacc. They will be the scourge of anything moving outside the charmed areas," said Quar Mordo, Mage of Pain.

"I have made ready the dreams that will hold he who comes," said Endellys, Mage of Dreams.

"I have found the myths relating to he who comes. I am ready to question him," said Lucedrix, Mage of Knowledge.

"I have spoken to the dead, who will take him when we are done," breathed Zomakh, Mage of Necromancy.

"I shall rip from him the secrets of immortality to enhance my own lore and render us all beyond death," said Tephlemtho, Mage of Immortality.

"And I," said Jundamar, Mage of Prophecy, "have been shown many paths, all obscured by shadows."

This had an unsettling effect. Quarramagus directed an angry retort at Jundamar. "The time of the invocation is at hand! Do you falter in our purpose? We must be strong!"

Jundamar was silent, but then he whispered. "Forgive me. I am ready. Let it begin."

Quarramagus nodded; he began a cantillation, slowly, rhythmically and low in some alien tongue. It was taken up by others until all of the Seven chanted in unison. The air pulsed with the evil sounds. Within the pentacle a gentle diffusion of light began, its source unknowable. Quarramagus spoke.

"Hear us, ye who dwell in the timeless void between the dimensions. We invoke you. Come to us. Come, Voldal. We invoke thee."

A careful scrutiny of the obscure records of Lucedrix had shown that to invoke the mythical dweller in the void it was but necessary to invoke his name, Voldal. Now the inner light grew in intensity. For brief seconds the vision of the Seven shimmered disjointedly. They closed their eyes, focussing

again, then saw a man standing in the centre of the pentacle. He was garbed in black raiment, with high leather boots, a shirt of nightweb, and with a jet cloak draped behind him like a storm cloud. At his side was an ebon scabbard and within rested a glimmering blade. All these things the Seven had anticipated and all that they knew of the Voldal they had been careful to counteract with the awesome barrier of thaumaturgy that surrounded the pentacle. Yet the most difficult part of their scheme had yet to follow.

The eyes of the Voldal flicked open as though he had been in a trance, or perhaps a listless dream. He stood serenely, unable to see beyond the rim of the pentacle, where black mist writhed. He smelled sorcery and was wary.

"Voldal," came a croak from the wall of night.

"I am he," said the man in black, recalling the name.

"You are the one that is doomed to wander, chained by the whim of the Dark Gods, whose petty deeds you are forced to perform."

"I am he."

"You are the immortal one, who can neither die nor kill."

A sardonic smile crossed the face of the Voldal. "These are riddles, voice from the shadows, and I will answer you with riddles - I am he and yet I am not he."

"You are without name, without destiny, without soul."

"You have named me Voldal, which is no name, but a curse. My destiny lies with those same Dark Gods against whom I once sinned. My soul - they have that also."

His words were answered by silence. Beyond the ring of night, one of the Seven growled quietly to his fellows. "I sense something of a snare. Be wary. None of these answers is as it should be. There should be no memory: part of his curse is to have none."

Silence came once more; the Voldal was patient. Then a voice drifted out of the darkness. "Do you recall your past?"

"A little. In dreams, perhaps."

"Speak of it!" hissed the voice.

"Is that part of my fate, to

tell of it? You have invoked me, yet I came not of my accord. My past is not clear to me; it rests about me like a mantle of spoiled, broken dreams. Yet it is mine and mine alone. Why should I divulge it when I have striven so much to wrest what I have of it from the Dark Gods?"

The voice grew impatient. "You have been invoked! You must obey us!"

"You are not my masters. It is they who have sent me. They move me as though I am a pawn and I am powerless to resist. I am their vessel, as are we all."

These words brought a murmur of unease from the ring of darkness, but the cold, imperative voice of Quar Mordo crackled on the air like the sting of a viper. "We are vessels of none! We have brought you here for our own purposes. You serve the Dark Gods no more. Our combined powers mock them in their remote fastnesses beyond limbo. We shall wrest your power from them with ease. You will see."

"Your destiny sits in our hands now, Voldal," added the mocking voice of Endellys.

But on the sharp features of the Voldal there was no emotion. No smile, no contempt, no fear. "If I am in your hands, I am indeed your pawn."

"He laughs behind his face," whispered Jundamar, but was ignored.

"We do not seek to manipulate you," said Quarramagus. "We seek the source of your power. We shall steal that from you, Voldal. After that we will do you a kindness, for you may wander where your own will takes you!" The sorcerer laughed.

A slight frown of puzzlement crossed the Voldal's features at that, and a shred of hope followed, but he remained motionless.

"Hold high your right fist that you keep from sight within your cloak," said Quarramagus.

Slowly the Voldal drew out his hand, looking down at it with a grimace of loathing. Holding it from him, he raised it, fist clenched.

"The hand of the Fatecaster,"

said his tormentors as one. "The key to your power. We have studied all that is known of its vague secrets. If it has been a curse to you, then our deeds here will seem a blessing."

The black-gloved hand was oddly lifeless. "A blessing?"

"You have no need of confusion, nor of fear," said the gentle voice of Endellys. "See, I will bring you dreams that will soothe a thousandfold times more than the torments of the Dark Gods." As he spoke a soft wave ebbed out from the darkness like cool air and in its blanket the Voldal felt the stirrings of images that writhed, worming into his mind, drawing out from him all his concern, his doubts and his fears. Slowly the visions - bright these, and not the tortured, enigmatic sendings of the Dark Gods - burrowed deeper into his psyche. He quickly began to succumb and a strange lethargy and peace settled over him.

The Seven observed. Endellys gloated over what he had done. In the pentacle the man in black had dropped silently to the floor.

"Now," said Quarramagus. "Our real test begins. Whatever powers work through this creature will put our mettle to the test. All of you, remember your parts in this."

Once more the Seven subsided into a softly chanting unit, the flow of energy from their potent cantillations drifting into the pentacle, unlocking with occult keys their ultimate designs. The right hand of the dreaming Voldal, which had been so lifeless, now stretched its fingers as though coming awake after a dormant age. It was the only part of the slumped figure that moved. Inside the pentacle a deep blue aura formed, coating the hand, sheathing it like a silken mist. The mist pulsed; inside the hand its veins throbbed and seethed like wires, livid with force. As the voices of the sorcerers rose, so did the strange hand detach itself from the fallen body, and like some drugged arachnid, it began a lurching crawl across the pentacle. The blue aura moved with it, surrounding it completely. Gradually it neared the

edge of the pentacle, well away from the body, then stopped.

A sigh broke from the combined ranks of the Seven as they saw that they had achieved their prime design. Their mumblings ceased and they looked upon the glowing hand in awe. Lucedrix spoke in triumph. "See! The very hand of the Fate-caster! The hand of Death. By this grim member are the dooms of those sealed whom the Dark Gods have marked. It shall do their work no more, for we shall never return it to their minion, the Voidal."

"The hand shall do our bidding now," agreed Quarramagus. Around him the other sorcerers breathed more easily, for the great spells they had worked had been taxing.

"What of the Voidal?" said Quar Mordo.

Quarramagus gave the inert figure a cold stare. "If he is indeed immortal as the writings say, he cannot be destroyed, though there is a riddle in that, as he said. He must be sealed away. Endellys has conceived a plan."

"Indeed I have. I will create an endless maze of dreams in which he shall wander contentedly for eternity."

"Very well," nodded Quarramagus. "The hand is secure. Break the pentacle."

Jundamar mouthed his doubts once more.

"The hand is sealed!" snapped Quarramagus. "And the Voidal is as one dead. Cease your tremblings. You have seen only doom for the Csarducts, not us. You'll undo us all with your lack of faith."

"Forgive me," breathed Jundamar. "My dreams are not unclouded as are yours."

"Break the pentacle. Take the hand to the Moonglobe we have prepared. There it will repose until we are ready to put it to our use."

"And the fall of the Csarducts will begin," said Zomakh.

"Endellys," said Quarramagus. "Attend to the removal of the Voidal. You know what to do with him."

"Oh yes, I do indeed."

Shadows clung to the Seven as they began the final stages of their devious work. High above them,

peering down through the slitted window in the curved dome, the squashed features of Elfloq looked on in wonder, marvelling at the things he had seen. Now the full ambitions of the Seven were made known to him for his sensitive ears had caught it all.

"Bring down the Csarducts, eh? Flaunt the servant of the Dark Gods in their very faces, eh? Dark Gods...who are these? Those whom Owl-worm spoke of? And those whom Dagwort fears? I note that his Master, Mage of Prophecy, is also tremulous. What has he glimpsed down future's tunnel, eh? I'll know more of this before I cast my fate with my own Master. 'Tis well Quarramagus is the spokesman in all these schemes, for I'll learn his will ere long." Taking a last glance within, the figure evaporated into the shadowed city.

THE dreams were kind.

There was light and warmth, and that grim cloud that always hung about him as a nimbus of foreboding had gone, lifted by gentle hands. Here in this vale of soft repose, he was able to forget all that he had detested. The tortures of his own enigmatic exile had left him.

He glimpsed himself in a pool. He was complete. A new hand had replaced...what? But he had already forgotten. He was in Paradise, the journey done.

EAST of the city, overhanging an extraordinarily bulbous mass of mooncoral, the gleaming tower of Lucedrix, Mage of Knowledge, rose majestically from the layers of the city. It was to this isolated pinnacle of mooncoral that Elfloq now sped, knowing that the Seven would yet be attending to the last of their affairs with the one they had invoked. Elfloq anticipated that here in the tower he would find Lucedrix's familiar, Surely, who still owed him a few favours. Here would be an opportunity to find out more about this Voidal.

Elfloq brazenly popped into being in the centre of Lucedrix's massive library of choked arcane

lore, in which there were a multitude of tomes and grimoires, most of which were duplicated nowhere else in all Pbaedrable. To his surprise, and then delight, Elfloq found Surefly already here, himself buried deeply within a dusty relic of elder works. Silently Elfloq padded through the dust and looked over the tiny shoulders of the familiar at the crimson runes spread out on the page.

"You find that interesting?" said Elfloq with a chuckle.

Surefly sucked in his breath with a start, closing the book, covering himself and the laughing Elfloq with swirling motes. His head bobbed, seemingly larger than his body. "I was just...uh...Elfloq! How dare you materialise in here! You flaunt familiars' privileges..."

"Fortunate for you I am not your Master. I am sure he would be most annoyed if he saw you pillaging his treasures."

Surefly's face screwed up like a wrinkled fruit. "What do you want?"

Elfloq's smile widened. "Oh, nothing much, friend. A little information, perhaps."

"The price being your silence -"

Elfloq waved this aside magnanimously. "Perhaps, but we must be swift. I am here not to tease you, which is undeniably more common with me."

Surefly noted the tone. "Oh? There is something amiss?"

"Even so. It began, as you recall, when we familiars were ordered to keep clear of our Masters. Most contrary to procedure."

"Indeed," sighed Surefly.

"Though in my Master's absence I have been able to...ah, indulge myself a trifle."

"Have you learned anything?"

"Have you?" replied Surefly suspiciously.

"There is an atmosphere overhanging the city. Can you not smell doom in the very air?"

"I sense the unease. It is more widespread than I had thought. The Seven are embarked on some dire exercise."

Elfloq nodded. "They are indeed. Already the old dome reeks with magics most unfamiliar with me.

Unhealthy magics."

Surefly tapped the tome he had closed. "I will confide in you, Elfloq, though it is only the uniqueness of the situation that -"

"Come, come, there is nothing in this for me. We are both familiars. Is that not enough?"

"Usually, no. But in view of the air of darkness that clouds Quell-ermondal, I will speak."

"Yes?" pressed Elfloq, containing his eagerness badly.

"There is a great fomenting of apprehension in the lower Tiers and more specifically in the Weedcoves. The Orgae are inordinately agitated."

Elfloq showed his surprise; this was not the direction from which he had expected enlightenment to come. "The...Orgae?"

"Yes. Whatever our Masters are doing in the dome, it is causing unique alarm to the Orgae."

"But why? How can they possibly be affected?"

Surefly held up a gnarled finger for silence. "That is what I have been trying to ascertain, at some pains. This tome deals with the deities and demons and such like of the ancient Orgae, most of which are virtually forgotten, having submerged themselves long ago when the Csarducts usurped power on Moonwater."

"Gods? The Orgae have Gods?" sneered Elfloq, but secretly he was piecing together more of the puzzle.

"Of course! Slumbering, mayhap, but they exist."

"And this enterprise of the Seven - it invokes the old Gods?"

"I rather think, my friend, that it antagonises them. Have you spoken to Owlworm? Well, he keeps blabbering about ripples. Something moving in the deeps. Astral deeps, he says, but I have been reading this, and I rather fear that he may be mistaken. The deeps of Moonwater, which are unplumbed, may be a more accurate epicentre for these supposed ripples."

"Ah," said Elfloq. So he was not the only one to be investigating the chain of abnormalities. "And what exactly do you foresee?"

Surefly grunted. "I would usually recommend you to a confer-

ence with Dagwort, but the Prophet's familiar is unseemingly tight-lipped with regard to prophecies. Cloudy, he mumbles. Typical incompetence. In view, however, of this clime of unease -"

"You envisage something unpleasant?"

"If only our Masters had confided in us! Their own familiars! We must assume they are in control, but -"

"They are ambitious beyond their normal dreams," mused Elfloq.

"Their appetite for power is insatiable."

Elfloq nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. But, come. Tell me more of these old Gods, my friend." And together they perused the ancient book.

IN A SECLUDED chamber of the tower of Quarramagus, the Seven stood in a half moon, looking towards the dais upon which the shimmering Moonglobe rested. Inside the translucent globe the deep blue mist swirled ceaselessly, like a living cloud; at its heart the hand of the Voldal had been gripped by invisible chains. It had now been rendered immobile by the tremendous strength of the spells of the sorcerers. Quarramagus boldly crossed the mosaicked floor and stood close to the lambent hues of the Moonglobe. He smiled in self-satisfaction, turning.

"We have tamed the Fatecaster. Now it will dispense its fates at our whim! Its finger will single out those whom we choose. Whatever doom comes to them, comes at our command."

Zomakh came forward, still looking upon the quiescent hand with apprehension. "When do we begin?"

"The Csarducts are on Moonwater in force. I will summon the first of them to this tower, promising him much power and food for his conqueror's lust. I will summon the great Dan Zar Enzo himself."

"And the hand?" said Quar Mordo.

"It will lay his doom upon him as is our will. For now, let us disperse. When I have prepared the ground for our evil seeds, I will send my familiar with word to



"Inside the translucent globe the deep blue mist swirled ceaselessly like a living cloud."

your own. They know nothing of our coup. Later, perhaps."

With a few muffled comments and last brief glances at the hand in the Moonglobe, the sorcerers began to quit the chamber of Quarramagus, satisfied at last that their grim work neared completion. Last of them to leave was Endellys. As he reached the portal, Quarramagus put an arm on his, gently.

"What of the Voidal, Endellys? Have you seen to him?"

"I have. He will dream for as long as we desire it. He is secreted in a remote place, where none of Quellermondal shall find him. My familiar tends him and will do so until I call him off."

Quarramagus nodded, permitting himself a chuckle. "Good. All goes well."

Endellys bowed courteously and left.

Quarramagus turned once more to the Moonglobe. "Yes, all goes very well. Yet I have one more magic to work before it is done. One more..." From his gown he drew a slender, sharp blade.

ELFLOQ had left the library in Lucedrix's tower where Surefly was now hastily tidying up the various books on Orgaen civilizations they had been perusing. Time now to investigate first hand, Elfloq decided. He took himself deep down into the city, past the levels of the Tiers, deep down into the perpetual shadow to the very level of the phosphorescent ocean where it slopped over the uppermost of the Weedcoves. There was an old den down here where low-born sailors gathered, and there was always news.

Elfloq was fast-moving, quick as the breeze, and able to meld with shadows so that most of the inhabitants of Quellermondal were no more aware of him than they were of the air he breathed. Now, at the base of the Tertiary Tiers, he paused, for his extraordinary senses told him that another of his fellow familiars was nearer at hand than would have been expected.

"Well," he breathed to himself, scowling behind a damp slab of mooncoral that had barely raised itself from the whispering sea.

"Has Surefly dipped down here to experience the Orgae first hand, too? Though he said he had no mind for it. These are indeed grim times when even familiars do not trust each other. But...no, not Surefly." He placed his tufted ear close to the damp mooncoral, ignoring its saline reek, and listened in to the subtle vibrations. Patiently he waited, calculating distances in silence. After a while he nodded to himself.

"Nighteye, or I'm a lump of stone!" he hissed. "But what is Endellys' familiar doing so far below the heights?" Cautiously he began to weave about the alleys and slideways of the Tertiary Tiers, evading the hunched figures that slumped along expressionlessly, cold and lifeless like men raised from the dead. It was a dreary, chilling domain without a soul. Moving away from the packed squalor of mooncoral slums, Elfloq crept out onto a spur of rock that poked like a disused jetty into the deep green sea, its end lost in sleeping mist. No one had observed him, so he scuttled over the broken chunks of mooncoral and approached the end of the finger. A rift led blackly down, seemingly to the Weedcoves. Elfloq disappeared like a fish, expecting to drop into the swirl of cool water, but the cave was of air and he realised that to remain in it he would have to skip into the astral. A few simple spells had been set to guard it, together with some rather unpleasant visions, but Elfloq grinned at them - child's play to him, familiar of the Mage of Spells. But why here, in a remote pocket of the astral?

Darkness presented no problems to Elfloq, for he had other senses capable of penetrating it. Deep in the crevasse he found a little chamber, as remote as anywhere in Quellermondal, he thought. Secreting himself with care, he looked and saw a slab of crystal, gleaming and shot through with wavering light. Lying prone upon it was the one who had materialised in the dome of the sorcerers, the Voidal. He was asleep.

Elfloq knew that Nighteye was here somewhere, but being unable

to see him for the moment, he quickly slipped across the chamber and stood before the sleeping figure. The pale face was expressionless, but Elfloq knew that the Voidal was dreaming. Both hands were upon his chest, hidden by the black cloak. With a sly glance around him, Elfloq gently lifted an edge of the cloak and nodded. The right hand was missing.

Something cold stabbed at Elfloq's back and he stood rooted in terror.

"Why are you here, interferer?" hissed a low voice, recognisable as Nighteye's.

"Nighteye, my friend," said Elfloq, not daring to move. The knife remained touching him.

"Interferer first, friend second. Why are you here? Who sent you?"

Elfloq swallowed with difficulty.

"Oh, come, come, Nighteye. You know me and my curiosity well enough..."

"Only too well. But whose errand are you on?"

"My own. My Master appears to have temporarily disposed of my services -"

Nighteye was briefly silent, but the knife withdrew. Elfloq risked turning. The sleepy-eyed familiar of the Dream Mage was studying him.

"There are things afoot that baffle me," said Nighteye with a yawn. "First my Master sent me off on some fool's errand, and I gather the other familiars were all likewise discharged for a time. After, I was told to guard this creature before you. I know nothing of what transpires (as usual). I have only released you, wily Elfloq, because it is evident from your presence that you know something (which is also no uncommon thing). So, allow me to ask again, less belligerently, why are you here?"

Elfloq nodded at the sleeping Voidal. "I came to see if I could learn anything from the sleeper. The Seven invoked him and then stole from him his right hand, which is the vessel of his powers. The Seven will use the powers of the hand to their own end -"

"More powers? Have they not enough? Must they seek to bring every last God of darkness under their sway? They will go too far."

"Just as I fear," nodded Elfloq. "I am my Master's familiar above all else, but should my Master chose to rebel against the Gods...and lose...well, I fancy that my own fate would be seriously jeopardised."

"What are you suggesting?" said Nighteye sceptically.

"Nothing my friend. Only that I value my existence. I would rather not toss it to the winds of chance and pray blindly for their favours."

"You feel our Masters over-reach themselves?"

"I would be more inclined to faith if they had confided in us."

Nighteye nodded. "Your tongue frames my very thoughts."

"Then?" urged Elfloq gently.

"Then -? What do you suggest?"

"Merely that we learn more of what is afoot. I know something already, as you anticipated. Well, I shall impart it all to you, my friend, and at once."

Nighteye looked even more sceptical. "And...what would be the price of this information, dear friend?"

"Simply a few words with the dreamer."

"I thought that might be your price."

"Well?"

"I can unlock his sleep for but a short time. My Master's magic is of the most puissant nature."

"Good enough," grinned Elfloq. "First I will tell you what I have learned." He then did so, though careful to edit the details so that it would be more than a little difficult for Nighteye to shape the entire puzzle. The latter listened with mounting interest, nodding and grunting. At the finish, he decided that, for once, Elfloq had played him fair, and agreed to wake the sleeper for a short time. Thus he stood beside the figure, leaning over its ear, and began reciting something soft that Elfloq (to his annoyance) could not hear. Presently the figure stirred and then came out

of its deep sleep slowly, like a beast deep beneath the sea surfacing cautiously.

"He wakes," said Nighteye.

"Is he secured?"

"Aye. The lethargy remains. He has no strength to move. Speak when you see his eyes open."

Soon the man was awake and his lids fluttered. Elfloq leaned over him. "Voidal," he said softly. "Do you hear me?"

It was like another dream to the man, seeing the puckered face, the thick lips and peculiar features. He nodded to the little creature so close to him.

"Good. I am Elfloq, a familiar of the sorcerers who brought you here. Do you understand?"

The face was calm, but it began to change, a mask of doubt. "Are the ill dreams to begin yet again?" he murmured.

"You dream no longer. You are awake. Do you not recall where you are?"

There was a long pause, but the figure nodded.

"Do you know why they brought you?" said Elfloq.

"Invoked me -"

"Yes. To do what?"

"My fate...is not mine to command."

"And your power?"

"Power?"

"How do you discharge your power? By your hand is it not, Fatecaster?"

The Voidal's eyes were alert now. Nighteye looked nervous, but the persistent Elfloq pressed closer, eager.

"My right hand," said the Voidal. "I remember."

"Show me," said Elfloq.

But a look of anguish crossed the man's face. "You do not know what you ask! Foul instrument, I dare not show it."

But Elfloq abruptly reached under the cloak and pulled out the wrist of the Voidal, showing him the severed stump, neatly bound in black cloth. "Sée! You have no right hand."

Stupefaction thrust aside fear on the countenance below the two familiars, but it quickly dissolved away into horror. "No hand? Yet in

the dreams I again had two. They were *clean*. My own, restored at last."

"No, your hand is with the Seven even now. They command it. Why? Why have they stolen it?" demanded Elfloq.

The Voidal shuddered. "Stolen it...yes, I recall. How foolish to think my ageless curse was raised! Your sorcerers are insane. They have no true conception of what they have done. The hand will return to me, as it always must."

"I think not," said Elfloq, shaking his head. "They have wrapped it in powerful magic. It obeys their will now. But why did they steal it? Tell me! What wonders will it perform?"

A strange serenity had spread itself over the Voidal's face. "They have done what they have done. They have no further use for me, and hence this phantom paradise in which they have set me. But the hand will seek to destroy them all. They cannot control it."

"Yet they have controlled you with ease," interrupted Nighteye. "Therefore is it not easier for them to control your mere hand?"

A cold, cynical laugh burst from the Voidal's lips and both familiars shrank back inadvertently at the wild sound. "My hand! Hah! It was *never* my hand. They purloined my true hand, those accursed Dark Gods, and the hand of which you speak is theirs. Through it I do their foul work, though I would shirk the task if I could. But if your Masters have truly stolen it, I am well rid of it. Yet they are crazed to think they can wield it."

"You underestimate their powers," said Nighteye.

"They know nothing of the Dark Gods," sneered the Voidal. "But it is their play. Let them do their worst."

"What will happen?" said Elfloq, moved now by growing anxiety.

The Voidal shook his head. "I cannot say. But Death will walk your city. I cannot leave until He has reaped his harvest, for He is the fee for my summoning."

"What of the Orgae?" went on Elfloq. "What part do they play?"

The Voidal seemed confused.

"Who are they?"

"The sea people. In the Weed-coves and lower Tiers. Their restlessness has not gone unobserved. Are they involved?"

"When I possessed the hand, I was plagued with dreams, visions, prophecies, and often saw in them something of what was to come. Yet the dreams sent me by your Masters showed me nothing of the future. Thus my vision is limited, my power truly usurped."

Elfloq frowned. "But if you were to regain your hand, your power? Could you then foretell what is to come?"

"Possibly, if the Dark Gods chose to show me."

"But the Seven will perish?"

"The Dark Gods will be mocked by none; greater beings than your Masters have fallen to them."

"If the Seven fall, the Orgae will rise, storming the city, for they will think the power of the Csarducts broken!" cried Nighteye.

"That would be so, if the Seven fell," agreed Elfloq. "And there would be new Gods in Quellermond. Or should I say, Old Gods returned?"

"Would that we could know!" exclaimed Nighteye.

"If the Orgae rise and take back this city," added Elfloq, "the Csarducts will come from the stars in force and destroy Moonwater utterly."

The Voidal listened to them in silence.

"Then...we shall all perish," muttered the unhappy Nighteye.

"Unless we prevent the fall of the Seven."

"We have only this creature's word that they may fall -"

"I am not overfond of risks," said Elfloq. "And I prefer to control as much of my own fate as I may. There are too many unhappy possibilities in this affair." He turned to the Voidal. "How may we prevent this catastrophe?"

The dark man shook his head. "We are mere pawns. We control nothing."

"But the prophecy?" said Nighteye. "If you reclaim the hand, you will see what doom shall come to Moonwater -"

"Doom?" echoed Elfloq. "If it is

to be that then I shall make for some more salubrious place, with all speed. And if my Master is to perish, then I shall find another!" He glanced slyly at the dark man, thinking on what might be.

"What's to be done?" said Nighteye glumly. Elfloq had severely dented what little peace of mind he had.

"I will confront your sorcerers," said the Voidal. "The hand is destructive beyond their understanding. I will plead for its return, else the Dark Gods may begin an indiscriminate punishment for the theft. The hand will leave a bloody swathe of chaos as it returns to..." He held up his arm grimly.

"You cannot leave, chained as you are by the spells of Endellys," said Nighteye.

"Then release him!" snapped Elfloq impatiently. "Surely it is clear we cannot ignore his plight."

"I can weaken the hold of the spells," said Nighteye, "but to free him...I doubt if I am able." But he set to chanting and muttering, making airy passes with his tiny fingers. Elfloq added what weight he could and the Voidal drew in his breath, steeling his wiry frame. There came a crackle of energy; the air was hot for a moment, heavy with powers, but the Voidal rose stiffly, swinging his legs from the slab and standing shakily. He drew his blade and it began to hum, absorbing the last of the binding spells and dispersing them.

"Is it done?" breathed Elfloq.

"Aye," said the dark man. "My thanks for your aid."

"Now my own fate is certainly cast with yours," said Nighteye, scowling at Elfloq. "Though I am fickle in my disloyalty."

"No, you are very wise!" laughed Elfloq, though nervously. "So, no dallying, lest your Master comes to examine his erstwhile prisoner. Let's away to the upper city."

"Take me before Quarramagus," said the Voidal, no longer drugged, but purposeful and assured.

THEY came by devious means to the tower of Quarramagus, for the wily Elfloq knew of the most tort-

uous methods of entry and was careful that his two companions and he should go undetected. Quarramagus had long since explained to the familiar the intricacies of the passages and corridors to the upper portion of the sorcerous tower, and Elfloq was thus once more able to avoid the numerous blasting spells and malefic demon guards that prowled the place in profusion. Outside the doors of the chamber of the sorcerer, the three halted, Elfloq speaking further runes and spells.

"How do you wish to enter?" he asked the Voldal.

"Is the Mage within?"

Elfloq listened, then nodded.

"I sense him - resting, I think."

The Voldal indicated the thick doors. "Open them."

Elfloq obeyed, but hopped aside to allow the dark figure first entry. The Voldal strode into the chamber, sword drawn, and glared ahead of him. A black-draped dais was before him, its cloth soaked and dripping; upon it, picked out in wispy candle-light were the glittering shards of some shattered vessel.

"The Moonglobe!" whispered Elfloq at the Voldal's waist. "Gods of the Pits! Where is the hand? It was imprisoned within."

The Voldal shook his head. "Then we are too late. It must have already begun its dreadful work. I smell blood in here." There was a squeak of terror behind him; Night-eye had popped out of being, preferring the astral.

"A fickle ally indeed," commented Elfloq with a sniff.

"Be silent," said the Voldal calmly, ears cocked. Elfloq immediately listened. There were strange giggles coming from an alcove, hidden by purple silks. "What lies there?"

Elfloq shrugged, not anxious to look. The Voldal walked across the bizarre designs and motifs upon the floor and reached for the drapes with the tip of his sword. Blood seeped in a thick pool from behind them. More eerie laughter came to his ears. Elfloq kept cautiously at bay, ready to follow Nighteye onto the astral at a hint of danger. The silks parted. There, cowering

against a stone wall, tittering like an imbecile, was Quarramagus.

"Your Master?" the Voldal asked Elfloq. The familiar nodded, shuffling forward in amazement.

"He is...insane," he breathed, seeing the mad eyes. The cowering figure held up an arm and the Voldal understood, for it ended in a black and withered hand, the same that had been stolen. Elfloq squawked as though singed by fire and leapt well back.

"Ambition has done this!" said the Voldal scornfully. "He has cheated his companions and sought to graft the hand of power onto his own." He pointed to pools of blood that led to a grisly hand in a corner, the dead hand of the Mage of Spells. "He sought to wield the power for himself. His perfidy has undone the combined power of the Seven and breached their defenses."

Elfloq nodded, grimacing at the two repellent members. "What now?"

But a sound behind them made them both turn to face a new dilemma, for the six remaining sorcerers of the Csarducts stood there, arranged in a half circle, their featureless heads directed at the two intruders.

"What treachery do you work here?" snarled Zomakh.

The Voldal stepped aside so that the sorcerers could look upon the mad thing that had been Quarramagus. The withered hand had now altered in appearance. It had left the Mage and was crawling across the floor towards the six, settling at the heart of a blasphemous design upon the floor and flattening itself. Each of its fingers pointed at one of the six, for there were now six fingers where there had been five.

For a period of several heartbeats the scene froze. Elfloq felt his every fibre shaking with terror as though he was in the presence of some colossal and imperishable evil. Then the six sorcerers broke ranks, and as one, turned and fled from the terrible severed hand. The Voldal alone seemed calm. He walked to the hand and looked down at it with more

loathing and disgust than Elfloq had ever seen upon the face of a man. The dark man bent down, obscuring the hand, but when he turned to face the familiar, he had two black-gloved hands, as though he had never been without them.

"Is it over?" said Elfloq unhappily.

"Over? I fear it has only just begun."

"What are we to do?"

The Voldal considered. "We can but wait. The familiars are your allies, your close fellows?"

"Well, no...they are...well," spluttered Elfloq, but then he shrugged. "Oh, yes, I suppose they are my fellows, my kindred."

"Go to them all. Tell them that the sorcerers of Quellermondal are doomed. The familiars must flee. The Dark Gods have no quarrel with them, but they are without pity."

Elfloq looked greatly disturbed, but nodded, glad to be able to quit the frightful chamber and the presence of the man who could face this impending catastrophe with such unnerving calmness.

JUNDAMAR, Mage of Prophecy, and the five other sorcerers were gathered in the tower of the former, all listening intently to the trilling voice of Dagwort, Jundamar's familiar. Dagwort had come rushing to Jundamar's side the moment his Master had returned from the ominous events in Quarramagus' tower, telling the Mage of the alarming things that portended in the city. Jundamar had called the remaining sorcerers to him at once and ordered Dagwort to repeat his dire warnings.

"Masters," said Dagwort, voice almost failing him in the presence of so many hallowed Mages. "I have been watching events in Quellermondal while you have been engaged in your workings of late. While below, in the very Weedcoves, I listened to the whispers and surrations of the Orgae. It seems they fear your power no more, for they plan to rise up through the city like a tide and reinstate themselves as its masters. They have certain prophets, who have been silent since the coming of the Csarducts, but who are now in-

citing the Orgae to rebellion, telling them that the time of their Old Gods is at hand. Soon they will rise."

"Who is behind this?" growled Zomakh. "Is this another of Quarramagus' treacheries? We have seen how he cheated us by seeking to use the hand for himself - is this how he worked its power upon us?"

The others pondered this, nodding; it seemed Zomakh spoke the truth.

Quar Mordo spoke. "Whatever the dreadful schemes of Quarramagus, he is mad in his tower. Should we fear the lowly Orgae? Ridiculous! Let us bring down a curse upon them at once and stifle their dreams of conquest. We must assert our power immediately."

This met with unanimous approval. Lucedrix held up a hand and they turned to him. "Some good may come of Quarramagus' foul treachery yet. Through it we may easily demonstrate to the Csarducts that he was singularly responsible for the invoking of this Voldal and that he tried to use its power to overthrow the Csarduct Dynasty."

"Excellent," nodded Zomakh, and his comment was quickly endorsed by the others.

"I submit," put in Tephlemytho, "that Quar Mordo, as celebrated Mage of Pain, devises the nature of the destruction of the Orgae. And quickly."

Quar Mordo bowed. "A means of chastisement has already come to mind. The Orgae must be severely punished, but not destroyed utterly. When this is done, they will still have their uses."

"Of course," the others agreed.

"I thought, perhaps, if we were to render their fighting arms useless..."

This met with the condonation of the sorcerers.

"Very well," nodded Quar Mordo.

"I will undertake the necessary working. The Orgae rising will be stillborn."

ELFLOQ entered again the apartments of his erstwhile Master, Quarramagus. He was less fearful now of what he would find, though still wary of the dark man he had

left here. He found the latter sitting in a carved chair, staring out into apparent nothingness. At the tread of Elfloq's gentle feet, the Voldal came alert and greeted him. Elfloq bowed.

"I have spoken with all the familiars, save Dagwort."

"And?"

"They are all undecided, but favour flight onto the astral realm until affairs here on Moonwater begin to balance again."

"They are wise then. But what of this Dagwort?"

"Familiar of Jundamar, Mage of Prophecy. He is most loyal to his Master and is reluctant to leave his side. They are together at the moment, Dagwort doubtless blathering as much as he knows."

"No matter. I doubt that any course the sorcerers chose will affect events to come. This Mage of Prophecy should see this, but it may be that the Dark Gods have drawn a veil over his far-seeing eyes."

Elfloq nodded, looking about him alertly, expecting anything. "May I enquire as to the fate of Quarragus?"

The Voldal nodded. "He is no more. His heart ceased to function and there is an end of it. Put him from your memory." A shadow crossed his face and Elfloq read enough in it to let the matter lie.

"There is other news," he said.

"Yes?"

Ordinarily Elfloq would have sought to barter his pieces of information, but he thought better of attempting to deal with the dark man. "The Csarducts, rulers of Moonwater and a thousand other worlds, are gathered in the royal palaces of Dan Zar Enzo, where they are conducting an orgy and a great feasting in honour of victories won in the extension of their stellar empire. Many of their great warlords are there. Soon they will come here to this tower, intending to consult the oracle of the Seven so that they may know of their next conquest and of its fruitfulness, though they have no need to ask!"

"The Csarducts? Many of them, and their greatest warriors?"

"Indeed, the very essence of their ruling body. A unique gathering."

"Now I see all things at once. I see why the Dark Gods have sent me."

"Oh?" said Elfloq, unsure how to press for more truths.

"The death of Quarragus was the first of three dooms sent to Moonwater. Three dooms - the hand, the arm and the body. The second doom will soon fall."

Elfloq grimaced. "What will you do?"

"I?" said the Voldal with a dry laugh. "I can do nothing save wait. I will not help these accursed Dark Gods, though it would amuse them to hear me say it."

Puzzled by the enigmatic reply, Elfloq nodded as though in comprehension. "I will wait also."

QUAR Mordo laughed unpleasantly. He had cast the magics. Now would the stinking Orgae feel his venom. Out into the shadowed city the spells had dissipated and soon would they reap their unsavoury harvest. Quar Mordo sat in his tower, crouched over the optic mirror - its surface shimmered like a silken pond and within were the images the Mage sought. The Weedcoves, Dark, festooned with trailing streamers of seaweed, curling with knotted vines of subterranean root. Here were the mooncoral havens of the lowly Orgae; seeping into them came the cruel spells of the sorcerer, the bane of all, sparing none. Quar Mordo laughed sharply as he saw the first of the aquatic folk stricken, and thereafter the curse spread like a virulent plague, so that the fighting arms of the dwellers in the sea were withered and made useless. Throughout all the dwelling places, all the harvest rooms, and all the far reaches of the Weedcoves the potent magic wrought its following curse. Quar Mordo turned from the mirror, his pineal window, nodding to himself with satisfaction.

"Let the Orgae rise! The Csarduct Dynasty has nothing to fear from cripples!"

JUNDAMAR looked out from his tower. The growing sense of dread that had been no more than a subtle streak in his dreams had now become an awning of doom drawn over the city of Quellermondel. The Seven had obscured the moons with clouds to shadow their evil work, but they had not gone - thick black billows of cloud had come scudding across the ocean, whose sprinkled lights had winked out, leaving the waters dark and oddly lifeless: a strange phenomenon for Moonwater, for without the moons or the sea-glow, the all-pervading darkness weighed down on Quellermondel like a choking mantle. Jundamar knew now that there were greater forces at work than the Seven had estimated, and that to control them would need a tremendous fusion of powers. His early doubts expanded with the darkness that had come and gloom settled even deeper within him than it did outside the tower.

Each of the other sorcerers secretly scowled at the artificial night that had drawn itself over the city. They watched from high windows and from their crystal globes and from their mirrors; they saw the low-born of the Tertiary Tiers bolting and barring the doors and windows of their hovels, all hiding within so that the alleys and backwaters were devoid of life or movement. Even the slinking cats and the scuttling alley rats were gone. On the Secondary Tiers it was likewise; all had gone within as though to be touched by the shadow of night meant instant pain. Only on the highest levels of the city was there any sign of inhabitation. Nowhere else was there light, sound or movement.

Then, beginning under the sea, in the Weedcoves, came the first of the movement. Wriggling, squirming movement. Like the coming of crabs or spiders it began, shrouded in the darkness. A tide unlike any known before on Moonwater, living, surging slowly upward beyond former levels. The six remaining sorcerers of the Csarducts did what they could to rip aside the weed veils that cloaked this strange surging, but failed. Everything had been obscured save the sure knowledge

that there was movement, upward. Out of the sea it moved, and on through the alleys and backstreets of the dingy Tertiary Tiers. Up it went, silent but purposeful. The dark clouds over the city thickened, making pale the lights high in the city.

It drifted up on silent legs to the Secondary Tiers, blotting out the lower, still encountering no living thing, ignoring the locks. Jundamar cursed with fear, for he had caught a brief glimpse of the substance of this remorseless flood. Dagwort, near at hand, muffled his own terrors and then withdrew discreetly, fleeing at last, knowing that the sorcerers were indeed doomed. Up into the Primary Tiers the black tide lapped, and those who were foolish enough to stray into the streets died horribly.

Quar Mordo was watching in his optic mirror, and now, as the mass came into the dim light, he gasped. He thought at first it was some natural army of crawling horrors from the depths, some clawing crustacean force, but now he knew otherwise. From the caverns below the city had come an *army of living hands*. Countless, seething, rolling forward like the sea itself, it came upward, groping blindly but with certain assurance. One for every hand we withered, realised Quar Mordo. Doors were being splintered aside on the Primary Tiers and the retainers of the Csarducts were dragged forth grimly and destroyed. Nothing could avail against the boiling waves of monsters.

"They have turned our magic back upon us!" cried Quar Mordo.

Now the first of the bloody hands were swarming up the walls of the sorcerers' towers so that there were six living, wriggling fingers of mooncoral pointed at the clothed moons, all alive with the rising army. Each of the sorcerers rushed up their spiral stairwells to the uppermost of their turrets and there began a defence, hurling spells and blasting rituals downwards. It was useless. The hands moved on in their thousands, easily climbing the rough mooncoral walls. Some were

destroyed and fell away, but the numbers were immeasurable.

As one, they smashed their way into the upper turrets of the six towers, battering down the doors, tearing apart the metal windows set against them, ripping away stone and mortar. Jundamar and the others all began a terrible shrieking. Terror clutched them icily and then turned to panic and ultimately madness as the fingers of the hands pointed. The six set up a maniacal laughing, eyes distending as each saw the carpet of hands closing in on them across their marbled floors. The laughter rose to a pitch that was drowned in pain as the first of the hands began grasping, tearing, rending.

ELFLOQ listened. The tower had become deathly silent now that all his Master's guardians were gone with him to dust. Yet he had heard a rising wind out in the city; it had sprung up from the ocean and now rose and rose, eddying about the seven towers as though building into a cyclone. "The wind," Elfloq breathed, "is unnatural. I hear strange laughing upon it - the mad shrieking of demons."

The Voldal shook his head patiently. "The last of the sorcerers shouts out his pain. Madness has claimed them, though it will not be for long. Soon they will be no more."

Elfloq shuddered as though the wind had beaten a path through the stone of this tower. "Are we to flee, lest we succumb?"

"We are safe enough. Come with me." The Voldal then led the familiar up to a small room and out through a wooden door onto a tiny balcony that overlooked Quellermond. Elfloq saw columns of shadow moving back down onto the depths, but could not identify the things that made up the swiftly subsiding tide. He felt that it was better for him not to know.

"Watch, Elfloq. The last of the dooms comes to Quellermond. This is to be the end of the Csarduct Dynasty."

Elfloq looked across dizzying distances to where the sea was barely visible. What Gods walked

behind the night there?

He waited.

"OUR revel within your splendid palace flares with brightness and extraordinary inventiveness," smiled Hor Zar Argo, notable Csarduct warrior of the First House. He addressed his immediate commander, Dan Zar Enzo, lord of Quellermond. "Yet it seems the lively fires within cannot match the formidable murmurings of the atmosphere without."

Dan Zar Enzo belched and gave a surly grunt, watching the garish antics of the orgy around him in the huge hall. "You swill words around your mouth as though tasting wine! I am a fighting man, Argo, and prefer simplicity in words."

"Indeed, but it would seem one could build a totally new language about the whimsical nature of the climate of Moonwater. The world fascinates me. I could state, simply, that there is a storm brewing without, but to do so, with respect sire, would be rudely to dismiss what must surely be a unique phenomenon."

"Fires of the Bloodworld, Argo! You are more confusing than my wine!" Dan Zar Enzo belched once more, laughing emptily.

"May I venture to suggest, sire, that you look (but briefly) at the storm? I assure you it is of a singularly ominous nature."

"Oh, very well. Cool air will not be unrewarding. Lead on," growled the huge Csarduct. As he walked with Hor Zar Argo out onto the lavish balcony of the upper palace, he was followed by a number of the Csarduct revellers; soon a company of them stood together, looking out over the shadow-clung city.

"Storm?" said Dan Zar Enzo. "But there is no sound! An unfamiliar darkness, I grant, but all else is peace."

"I hear the sea," said Har Zar Argo. "There were frightful gusts but a while ago."

"The sea is dark," said another of the Csarduct lords. "Where are its shimmering lights?"

"Where are the lights of the city? All is pitch," said another.

Dan Zar Enzo gazed up at the sorcerers' towers. They were black and lifeless like gutted trees. The huge man scowled. "All is not as it should be," he conceded to Hor Zar Argo. He turned to one of the many ubiquitous guardsmen. "Alert the soldiery at once! Be ready to move at a word." The man bowed and vanished in an instant. Dan Zar Enzo leaned on the balustrade, staring at the sprawling mooncoral city for movement. Now he heard the rush of the distant sea. One by one the seven aquamarine moons slipped out from their coy hiding places.

"The work of your sorcerers, surely?" asked one of the lords, drawing back dubiously.

Dan Zar Enzo pointed. "There. What transpires?"

The sea was alive with movement, as though whipped by a tornado. It began to undulate like a gigantic beast; waves built up and rushed in like wolves on the lowest of the mooncoral structures. Greater waves began to gather and heave forward from out of the ocean deeps. Vibrations shook the very palace as these huge waves thundered down on the city.

"Some undersea upheaval," muttered Hor Zar Argo.

"The sorcerers shall answer for this!" roared Dan Zar Enzo and turned. As he did so the wind roared

and gusted out of nothing like the rasping breath of a monstrous god, and all the doors to the festive chamber slammed shut, afterwards proving immovable. The Csarducts dragged out their killing swords and turned their attention to the city once more. The ocean had suddenly come awake and now surged forward and upward, shaking the foundations of the city, crashing inwards and creating huge fissures and splits in the walls of mooncoral. Towers began to splinter and crumble as the water rose. Out at sea the waves lifted themselves like questing beasts, thousands of feet high, as though all the sea of Moonwater came to the affray, racing down on Quellermondal, hanging over it now like fists. The wind fumed and boiled and clouds closed for the last time over the moons.

Living streamers of water reached up, licking like tongues at the Tiers, dragging them down. Dan Zar Enzo screamed as he saw the hideous faces that leered from out of the immeasurable walls of water. Up and ever up they rose, blotting the stars, as though all the gods of hell had come to crush down on him and his city. Millions of tons of water cascaded into the alleys and houses, towers and palaces. Like ants the populace were swirled out of their holes and sucked down into oblivion. To the howling Csarducts it seemed that their innards were gripped and squashed by huge fists of water. Moonwater had come to life and its ocean extracted a terrible revenge for the tyranny of the Csarducts. In the deepest of the deeps, the Orgae listened.

One tower survived the cataclysm, and in it the two figures watched, one placidly, one in terror. The Dark Gods had unleashed their frightful reckoning.

"We are doomed!" wailed Elfloq, gripping the cloak of the dark man, but he remained still, watching the thunderous collapse of the city where avalanches of mooncoral plummeted down into the whirling chaos.

"It will soon be done. Flee to the astral, Elfloq. There is time."

"But what of you? Surely you



"Dan Zar Enzo screamed as he saw the hideous faces that leered."

have the power to escape? I cannot leave you."

The Voidal turned a look of surprise on him. "No? Yet it is through me that this came about," he said, pointing at the destruction that surged about them. "This has been your world."

"Aye, but not by choice. I have lost my place in Quellermondell, but I have gained my will!"

The Voidal nodded sadly. "Yes, your fate is yours to weave as you will from now on."

"But...you have smashed the power of the sorcerers! You, too, are free to quit this madness and be your own master."

The Voidal felt the shaking of the tower. Soon it would fall.

"Free, Elfloq? Would that I were.

But not yet, I think. Now - go! The tower will collapse."

Still Elfloq paused, almost ignoring the booming approach of the mighty wave army as it sought to close over the last of Quellermondell.

"I will accompany you and serve you if you wish it!" he shouted above the din.

"Flee!" cried the Voidal as the towering water began its fall like the sky dropping. Elfloq blinked out and the Voidal prepared himself for the darkness that he knew would immerse him. And the nightmares.

"Well met, little familiar," he breathed as the water came down.

"Perhaps you shall serve me yet. Well met in Hell."

Love Philtre

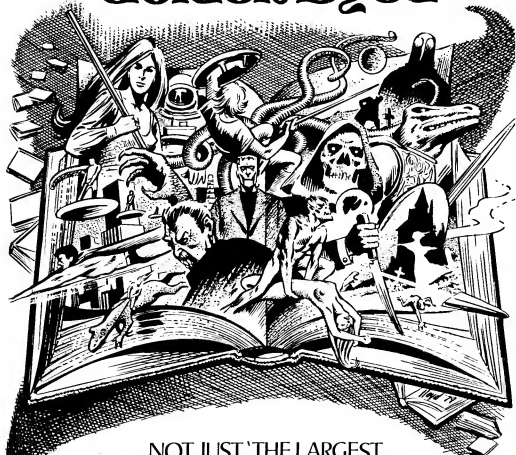
By H. WARNER MUNN

HERE is foam from the jaws of a dog werewolf
That was known to have the rabies.
I will add it, beneath a gibbous moon,
To the bubbling blood of babies.
Taking hair from the ear of a unicorn
And the eye of a mantichore,
I shall let them in the cauldron seethe
While the wind is snell and froze.

With hangman's rope and murderer's fat
I stoke the infernal fire -
Now, as you wait, accept kisses three,
My lovely, fierce vampire!
The draught shall cool in the bleached brain pan
Of a deserted infant's skull,
Gnawed in the woods by the teeth of ghoul
When left there by a trull.

I had thirteen sprigs of dittany
And steep seven twigs of rue -
Now slowly as the bell knells twelve,
Drink down the baleful brew.
Up, up and away and ride the wind!
Though it hurl you far and free,
Never again till the Day of Doom
Can it take you away from me!

Dark They Were And Golden Eyed



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Ken Dickson tells us he writes very intermittently, but you will find that *The Chinese Box* is a cleverly handled and quite grisly horror story. Another of his tales, *His Winter Hobby*, was published by The British Fantasy Society in their journal *Dark Horizons* (issue 18, July 1978.)



"From inside the box a hand emerged, with lengthy tapering fingernails."

The Chinese Box

By KEN DICKSON

Illustration by ALAN HUNTER

MR. ANGUS Morrison was not what you could call a dedicated collector of antiques, by no means an aficionado, but he *did* have a large, recently acquired and extremely bare house crying out for just a little more than the absolute essentials with which it was presently furnished, and *there* the antique shop was, and he was standing drenched at the bus stop immediately opposite, so, thankful for any excuse to get out of the

downpour, he dashed across the road between the stationary King's Road traffic and through the bell-tinkling doorway into the shop.

Gloom, and a veritable throng of chairs, desks, mirrors, bureaux and incunabula surrounded him. Highly-polished junk, he thought, perhaps a trifle uncharitably. And doubtless horribly expensive. In any case he regarded the purchase of ornaments and decorations, and the general softening of the

basic outlines of a house, as a woman's job. It was at times like this, when compelled to perform such distasteful tasks for himself, that Angus Morrison almost wished he had married.

Of course the fancy never lasted long. Morrison was not the marrying kind, being a mean, morose and misogynistic as middle-aged Scottish bachelors are traditionally expected to be.

Stepping a little further into the shop he examined the price-tags on one or two of the objects around him with a shudder of dismay. Did they seriously expect to get a hundred and fifty guineas for that ugly great vase? Well, they would get none of their fancy London prices from him.

A curtain at the back doorway was drawn back and a tall man entered, immaculately if somberly dressed. He towered over Morrison's squat figure.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Well, I don't know. I'm just looking really. Mainly for ornaments, you know, that sort of thing. Nothing too dear, mind."

"I see, sir. Would this be the sort of thing you had in mind?"

The man indicated a set of cut-crystal bowls, sparkingly illuminated by spot-lights, displayed on a shelf along one wall.

"Lovely, aren't they? What joy, to own such a set!"

Morrison picked up the small piece of cardboard with the price typed on it, and quickly set it back down again.

"Not quite what I'm looking for, I don't think. Perhaps something bigger? It's a matter of filling up some empty spaces in a new house as much as anything, to be honest," he explained.

"Something like a writing-bureau perhaps? Now here is a really beautiful Louis Quinze."

Morrison peered at the magnificent piece in some trepidation, the noughts already ticking over in his mind as he tried to imagine the price.

"A bit out of my range," he started to say, when his eye was caught by a large metal object standing in one corner. "What's

that?"

Following his gaze the assistant appeared to hesitate momentarily before replying. "It's just a box, sir, Chinese, seventeenth-century. There is something of a story attached to it, if you would be interested?"

Morrison glanced out of the window at the darkening street. The rain was still pelting down. "Why not?"

"Well, the story goes that it once belonged to a Cantonese priest named Huang-Tse Yuan, reputedly a very evil man and leader of a sect of Devil-worshippers. They were supposed to have performed surgical experiments of a most unpleasant nature on any poor unfortunates who happened to fall into their clutches. The pain, apparently, was a kind of offering to the Lord of Evil, and the more exquisite and prolonged the suffering, the better. In fact, so pleased was Satan with the priest's devoted offerings that he granted him certain, limited supernatural powers. Or so legend has it."

The tall man, rather shame-facedly, shrugged, as if in apology for telling such a preposterous story.

"Twaddle," Morrison remarked. If the fool thought he could get him interested in buying the box by telling him this ludicrous tale, he was sadly mistaken. Still, it was certainly an unusual object and would make rather a novel way of filling one of the spare corners of his sitting-room. He considered the box more closely.

About four feet tall, shaped not unlike a modern laundry basket, tapering towards the bottom, it seemed to be made entirely of cast-iron and was carved all over with dragons and demons and other shapes which Morrison could not readily identify. The lid was also of iron with a round handle on top, and was hinged at the back. The whole thing must weigh a ton, Morrison thought, and doubtless, considering its antiquity, had a price-tag to match.

"I don't seem to see a price anywhere," he remarked as casually as possible, while dreading the reply. He had no intention of paying

any astronomical sum. Although fairly comfortably off now, he was not a rich man and prided himself on his thrift. So, having braced himself for a shock, he was unable to take in immediately what the other said, and had to ask him to repeat it.

"Twenty-five pounds, sir. I know it does not sound a lot for such a piece but don't let the price cause you any doubts as to its authenticity. To be honest, the stories about it have turned several prospective buyers away."

"Stories? What stories? Surely the fact that it is supposed to have belonged to some wicked priest was not enough to put anyone off?"

Morrison looked doubtful. Perhaps the chap was spinning him another line to get him interested, but he had never known a salesman go so far as to actually drop the price as well! It seemed to him that a genuine embarrassment mingled with the antique-dealer's naturally lugubrious expression as he replied.

"Well, no sir, not quite that, but there is another part of the story which I haven't told you yet. It is said that after the Devil gave Huang-Tse Yuan these supernatural powers he used them to make this box. Legend has it that he intended to use it as a sort of gateway to other times - that anything placed in it is transported to seventeenth-century Canton, and then when Huang-Tse Yuan is finished with it, returned. Indeed there have been reports of objects disappearing. The previous owner even told me that once his cat disappeared, and then a few days later its body was found in here, horribly mutilated. Of course I feel obliged to tell these things to anyone who shows an interest in the box, and no doubt as a result it has proved extremely difficult to sell."

Morrison could not make up his mind whether the man was really serious about his absurd story, but the box would look well in his sitting room and the story would be an amusing one to tell old Martin and Waller when they came round at the weekend. Finally the price decided him.

"I still say twaddle but I'll

give you twenty pounds for it. Do you deliver?" The box proved to be not nearly as heavy as he had expected when he tried to lift it, but it was still a bit unmanageable to take home in the bus, and he was damned if he would pay the taxi fare back to Putney. However, the man did not seem at all put out by having his price so abruptly lowered, and accepted the offer without apparent qualm.

"Yes indeed, sir. Friday all right?"

The fact that the dealer seemed glad to be rid of the box at any price caused Morrison only a moment or two of doubt. He rode the bus home in a mood of self-congratulation at his hard-headed business acumen.

PUNCTUALLY at eight o'clock on Friday evening the cars of his friends Martin and Waller pulled up almost simultaneously in Morrison's driveway. Since he had come down to London two months previously Morrison had spent almost every Friday evening at the home of one or other of his two friends, but this was the first time he had felt able to return the compliment, now that he had eventually succeeded in getting the house into some sort of order as he felt.

Both, like Morrison, retired within the last year, the two native Londoners had known each other for many years. Morrison had met them the previous summer on a sight-seeing tour of France and had thought them brothers at first. Both were over six-feet tall, slim and balding, although Martin wore pince-nez, a habit Morrison considered an affectation, as he regularly advised his friend.

Their host met them at the door and, after the usual greetings, ushered them into the spacious sitting-room, sat them in two vast black leather armchairs and handed them each a tumblerful of malt whisky.

"Gentlemen, you have both been very kind to a newcomer to this city and, in return I want you both just to relax and have a pleasant evening. I have asked Mrs. Whittle to prepare something a little

special for dinner, I have laid on some very nice Hock and I assure you we are in no danger of running short of this," (he patted the bottle of old Malt affectionately), "I regard tonight as something of a housewarming, you know."

"And very well you've done for yourself, Angus, I must say," said Waller looking round the comfortably furnished room, "though still just a shade bare, is it not?"

"To be sure, but gradually that situation is improving. Only this afternoon I had an object delivered which, after dinner, I should like you both to see and let me have your opinions on. It may interest you particularly, Martin, knowing your antiquarian tastes. But here is Mrs. Whittle. I trust you are both ravenous?"

THE two guests gave their host's new acquisition rather a lukewarm reception however.

"Well, it's unusual, Angus," Waller commented, "but I can't say I find it a particularly attractive object. Somewhat morbid those carvings, don't you think? Looks like some kind of torture-chamber."

At Waller's words Angus realised that what he had taken for demons were, in fact, intended to be human beings, their faces contorted in an extremity of suffering and anguish.

His guests' attitude turned to one of surprise, however, as did his own, when he lifted back the lid. Inside there was nothing but blackness. Harry Waller professed to be able to discern the internal delineation of the box as a slightly less dark configuration upon the utter black. George told him it was his imagination.

"That is most remarkable," Martin said, "obviously an effect of the light. Whatever the material of the box is, and it looks like something midway between stone and iron, it must be totally light-absorbent and non-reflective. I've never seen anything like it." He was about to reach his hand down inside the box, to feel for the bottom, when Angus stopped him.

"Before you do that, George,

perhaps you'd better hear the story the chap who sold me the box told me." Angus then, rather self-consciously, related the legend, finishing "All absolute piffle, of course."

Surprisingly, Waller demurred. "I shouldn't be too sure Angus."

"But Good Lord, Harry, surely you don't believe this nonsense?"

"Of course not. I never believe anything I haven't seen for myself, and I know we are none of us religious men." He smiled at the others. However, neither am I prepared to dismiss anything out of hand if there is a way to prove or disprove it."

"You mean put something in the box and see what happens?"

"Why not? This Chinese priest, if he ever existed, apparently regarded his brand of Oriental Sadism as a religion. It's not every day one has a chance to pin down any religion as definitely as this, is it?"

"I suppose not. But of course nothing will happen, and then we'll all feel such bloody fools!"

"Not at all. We can always tell ourselves it was all in the interests of theology, or science, or philosophy...or anything you please for that matter."

Angus smiled. "All right then. What shall we use?"

"Let's see. I suppose it has got to be something animate. You haven't got any laboratory rats or guinea-pigs in the house I don't suppose? Mmm...then how about Mrs. Whittle's poodle?"

"Well, it's a damned pest. I could almost wish something would happen to it. But of course Mrs. W. would never allow it."

"But does she have to know?"

"You mean... Oh no, I couldn't."

"Now don't tell me you're afraid that anything would happen?"

"Of course not." Angus looked pleadingly at his two friends but in the face of their combined enthusiasm, wilted. "I suppose it need only be for a few minutes."

"Right."

"Well she usually goes to bed around ten-thirty and leaves Sam in his box in the kitchen. We could borrow him after that."

They allowed a decent interval after Mrs. Whittle had said good-night, then Angus carried the still half-asleep Sam back from the kitchen. Too drowsy to be his normal, bad-tempered self the little black poodle lay quietly in his arms, whining softly.

"I feel like a kidnapper," Angus laughed. "Lift the lid, George. Here goes."

He stooped to place the dog down inside the box but could not quite reach the bottom, and dropped Sam what he thought was the remaining few inches. At this unusually undignified treatment the pampered pet came fully awake and started to voice his protest but the noise stopped suddenly, cut-off, as it were, in mid-yelp.

Silence.

Angus looked down into the darkness in disbelief, and after a moment was joined by the others.

"Good God," George said at last.

"Perhaps it's in there and we just can't see it," Waller suggested hopefully.

"No, we would at least hear it moving. It would be trying to get out," Angus said. "Wait."

He went into the kitchen and returned a moment later with a broom handle which he put inside the box and shook, vigorously. There was a dull clanging as it struck the sides, but nothing else.

"It's gone all right, though God knows where."

Angus poured out half a glass of neat Scotch and drank it straight off, then, remembering the others, poured two more.

"Bloody hell," he said.

"Quite," Harry agreed. "Look, it's just not possible. It just is not possible that we put a little black poodle into a big iron box in Putney in 1979 and the next second it's been whisked off to ancient China. There must be some trick. Tell us, Angus, it's some kind of conjurer's trick box, isn't it?"

But he could tell by his host's face that if there were any trick involved Angus was not in on it.

They sat in silence, unable to think of anything to say.

Eventually Angus went over to

the box and tilted it in all directions, examining its surface minutely for any sign of an opening. He banged it with the broom handle. Nothing. Then, setting it back down, he re-opened the lid, and as he did so, gasped, "Look at this!"

The interior of the box was no longer a hole of blackness, but sides and bottom were now clearly visible, though in shadow. Two things, however, lay on the bottom.

Most obviously, and most horrifically, what was left of Sam. Flayed, and with every bone removed, the little heap of flesh twitched spasmodically, as though the last vestiges of physical reaction had not yet ceased, though life was gone. Beside it, lay ten gold coins.

Once more it took them many seconds before anyone could say anything and then Harry blurted, "Look here, Angus.!" and was about to state that if this was a joke it was in very poor taste, when a glance at his host's ashen countenance so completely denied the possibility that he lapsed back into stunned and bewildered silence.

Angus shivered, and though it was still a mild summer evening outside, he closed the windows and drew the curtains. Then, the first to recover any degree of self-composure, he stood with his back to the glowing fire and tried to put into words the formless fears and suspicions which crowded his mind.

"First of all," he began, "I want to assure you that I bought that box just as I told you I did, and the story I told you was, as near as I could make it, as it was told to me. So I know no more about it than you both now do. I scoffed at the story, of course, when I first heard it, but if we don't accept it what other possibility is there? The only one I can even think of is the conjurer's trick-box idea which you suggested, Harry. Well, we've looked at the box and it doesn't seem possible, apart from the fact that there is no motive for anyone to do it, since I didn't. And I sincerely hope you know me well enough to know that this," he gestured toward the little grisly bundle in the box, "would not be my idea of a joke at all!"

"Just a second, Angus," George said, moving across the room. Trying to ignore the box's other contents, he scooped up the small pile of gold coins. "These are unusual coins. They're very heavy. There's a castle affair on one side and a dragon on the other, rather crudely stamped. But they're gold all right." He passed them round. "Of course if we were to accept this business of supernatural powers and all the rest of it, these could be regarded as payment for poor Sam. It does have a kind of gruesome consistency."

"About the consistency of dried blood." Harry said, and shuddered. "I have a horrible feeling that if we were to follow this through logically I know where it would lead us."

"What do you mean?" Angus asked.

"I think I know," George said. "We put Sam in there as a test, didn't we? I don't think any of us really expected anything to happen but, well, something nasty did. We got back one mutilated dog and some, apparently, Chinese coins. So, it looks as if the story is true, impossible as it might seem. We are left with no logical alternative. However, despite this I get the feeling that we are still not prepared to accept the situation at its face value. I know I'm not. Our cynical, modern, Western minds still rebel at accepting anything so outlandish. You see what I'm driving at?"

"Another test?" Angus said.

The others nodded.

"Of course it could be a very profitable test," George interjected, jingling the coins in his hand. They stared at him in shocked surprise.

"I mean, if this is the going rate for one small poodle," he shook the coins again, "and I reckon these must be worth at least two-hundred pounds in gold value alone, let alone possible antique value, who knows what price, er, shall we say something *bigger* might fetch?" Head tilted back, he peered at them through his pince-nez.

"You're not serious?" Harry demanded.

"Why not? We are none of us rich

men. Well, we could be, with very little risk involved."

"You cold-blooded bastard! Angus, tell him it's..." His sentence petered out at a glance at the Scotsman's face. Angus, obviously, had already seen the possibilities, and his natural financial proclivities were already inclining him towards agreement with George.

"But it's murder!" Harry shouted. "You know that, don't you? What you're suggesting is nothing short of murder! I can't believe it, George, I've known you for years, you can't mean this?"

"Calm down, Harry. Obviously we'll have to consider this more fully to ensure that we're not overlooking anything. But it seems pretty foolproof to me."

"Look, I think we ought to stop here for tonight," Angus interrupted. "It's late, we're all tired, and a hell of a lot has happened tonight that will require thinking about and absorbing, and even believing. What do you say we all give ourselves tomorrow to think about it and about what the possibilities might be? All right? We'll meet here again tomorrow night."

"Fine by me," George said. "I think we're getting a bit hysterical anyway. But what about that?" He nodded toward the Chinese box.

"I'll get rid of what's left of Sam in the furnace and make some excuse to Mrs. Whittle," Angus said, "tell her he ran off or something. She won't believe it completely but she can't dispute it."

So, in a sombre mood, they said goodnight.

MRS. Whittle was a short, round, red-faced but amiable widow in her late forties whose sole companion since the death of her husband five years previously had been a short-tempered poodle named Sam. Naturally, therefore, the story of Sam's disappearance came as a severe shock to her. Besides, it did not sound at all like Sam to run off like that, when normally the most energetic thing he ever did was to rise from his box and walk to his food-bowl, or, twice a day, to the nearest lamp-post outside.

It was a red-eyed Mrs. Whittle

therefore, who served supper to the three again on Saturday evening, and gratefully took the silence of her employer and his guests at the table as a mark of their sympathy with her loss.

No sooner had the door clicked shut behind her, however, than Angus hissed, "Well?"

All day the thought of murdering a fellow human-being, no matter how unimportant and insignificant, had vied for domination in his mind with the thought of an impressively large pile of gold coins, and as evening approached the latter was undoubtedly winning. Nor had Mrs. Whittle's maudlin reaction when Angus related his fiction of the disappearance of her pet improved his idea of her worth.

"I say yes, let's do it," George Martin replied at once. "How about you, Harry?"

"Well, I still don't know," Waller replied. "I have just about got myself used to the idea that that box might be some kind of time-door. But even so the story still doesn't hold water. I mean, why should this Chinese priest be so willing to pay large sums of money to procure victims from other times? Why can't he get hold of all the sacrificial offerings he wants right where he is?"

"I can tell you that," said Morrison. "I went to the British Museum this afternoon to see if I could find anything about this Huang-Tse Yuan, and found a whole chapter about him in one book. Apparently the Emperor at the time was rather a liberal-minded chap for those days and he took strong exception to Huang's activities, apart from the fact that the population of the area was becoming somewhat depleted! Anyway, fact and legend are pretty well mixed up, as you can imagine, but it seems the Emperor's army was unable to enter Huang's castle, either because it was so well defended or because of some supernatural influence, but they were able to insure that no-one ever left it. Hence the box (which the book made no mention of, by the way) was his only means of procuring victims."

"Well this whole thing sounds

like a Chinese box to me," Waller commented. "You know what I mean, the sort with one box inside another, and another inside that, and so on. I mean, here we are wondering if there is any truth to this story of Chinese priests and Emperors and supernatural powers and all the rest of it. I can imagine someone reading our story one day and wondering how much truth there is in it. And another after that, maybe. Ultimately, I suppose, there is God, whom none of us believe in."

"God and the Devil," Angus reminded him, "who is supposed to have given these powers to Huang-Tse Yuan."

"Right."

"Look, we're no nearer solving the mysteries of the Universe," George impatiently interrupted, "but we seem to have found a way to profit by them. Do we go on?"

"I say yes," said Angus, and after a moment Harry concurred. "Okay," he said.

MRS. Whittle awoke as a rough cloth was pressed into her mouth, and strong arms lifted her from her warm bed. She tried to scream but very little sound emerged. What was happening? It was Mr. Morrison and the other two! Great God, what were they doing? Doubtless they were about to commit some gross indignities upon her person such as she had not permitted since her dear Henry passed away, and not very often before. They were carrying her into the dining-room. She kicked and thrashed but was gripped even tighter. Well, what match was she for three strong men? Much safer to lie quietly and submit till their evil lusts had passed from them. But why the dining-room? Mr. Morrison was opening that horrible Chinese box. Oh no! A horror of claustrophobia convulsed her and she kicked more wildly. She was being pushed, head first, down into the box, and suddenly, they let her go. She felt herself drop.

THE deed done, the three sat round the crackling fire and sipped their drinks. Each had reacted

differently to what they had done. Harry sat in silence, gazing balefully into the heart of the flames, whereas George had become abnormally garrulous, chattering nervously about nothing and expecting no reply. Only Angus seemed comparatively unaffected. His fingers thrummed rhythmically on the leather chair-arm but otherwise he displayed no sign of having done anything out of the ordinary. He was the first to allude to it.

"How long, do you suppose, before the, er, return of post?"

"Not long, I should say," Harry quietly replied. "Time spent 'there' would have no relation to our time and I should imagine they would return things to a point as soon as possible after that which they came from."

In instant confirmation of his words a muffled thump, as of something heavy and soft dropping onto a hard surface, came from the box, causing all three to look round to where it stood, sullen and aloof, in its shadowy corner.

For a long moment no-one spoke or moved, and then the three rose simultaneously, as if they had agreed telepathically that it had to be done together, or not at all, and moved across the room. The hinges creaked as Angus lifted back the lid.

An abattoir stench of flesh and entrails rose at once to hit them, and Angus stepped back, coughing. Inside the box the flaccid remains of Mrs. Whittle were shapelessly heaped, with no longer any rigid internal structure to give them form, as if somehow, shockingly, evaginated by some skilful surgeon.

They stared dumbly at each other, no words being nearly adequate to this moment when the results of their action had become awful fact. Eventually Harry said "Christ", as if by voicing even a small part of his horror he could lessen its enormity.

Steeling himself, Angus looked once more into the box's dim but visible interior then straightened up, his pallid face turning to grey.

"There's no gold!" he whispered.

"Perhaps it's...underneath," George suggested.

"Maybe," Angus said, visibly relieved at the possibility. "Anyway, let's get rid of this."

Assuming command, in his practical way, Angus sent George off to stoke up the waste-disposal furnace out back, and Harry to bring plastic bags from the kitchen and polythene sheeting to cover the floor. Then, with the aid of the large coal-tong he set to work himself removing the body from the box. Almost all the blood had apparently been drained off so it was not too messy an operation. Nor was the body in one piece as Angus had feared so he made rapid progress while Harry carried the bags out to the furnace. Angus was gingerly lifting the last major section with the tongs so that he could see if the expected pile of gold coins lay underneath, when the interior of the box seemed to turn black.

HARRY, on the way out with his load, had met George at the back door when they heard Morrison's scream. Hastily dropping the bag on the table they rushed back to the dining-room.

Morrison's head and torso had already disappeared down inside the Chinese box and only his wildly kicking legs were still visible. Then, as they watched in numbed horror, his legs too gradually slid down inside the box. For a second his feet caught on the rim, clinging desperately for a hold, before they too finally disappeared.

Martin and Waller stood, just inside the doorway, open-mouthed and paralysed. But a moment later their paralytic immobility turned to a fluxed, hysterical terror and they ran shrieking into the night. For then, from inside the box a hand emerged, a hand thin and sallow, with lengthy tapering fingernails, and glittering rings on the long fingers. It groped ineffectually for a moment, the talons scratching horribly on the underside of the lid, then it withdrew, closing the lid behind it.

Some time later a muffled thump, as of something heavy and soft dropping onto a hard surface, came from the Chinese box, but there was no-one there to hear it.

Nor was there anyone to bear witness when, some hours later, a tall, dark, somberly-dressed man walked in through the door left open in the hasty departure of Martin and

Waller, and then emerged a few minutes later dragging a heavy iron box which he loaded into a waiting van, and quietly drove off into the rainy night.



Mourning of the Following Day

By KARL EDWARD WAGNER

KANE rides alone through the night.
Where do you ride tonight, Kane?
Tomorrow you lead an army on the road of conquest.
There's no rest for you tonight, Kane.
At night you're haunted by age-old dreams;
There is no refuge for Kane in sleep.
By day you're driven by the curse of your past;
And so you play your games.
Again you'll lead your army on the road to death;
Again you'll smash at cities and reap the red harvest;
Again you'll curse the gods of destiny;
While you shift the fates of kingdoms,
To play at your game.
How many times, Kane?
How many of these nights before the dawn of war?
How many armies have you lead?
How many battles have you fought?
How many times have you riven the web of destiny?
And what have you ever won?
Ride on through the night, Kane, alone,
Like a comet that comes and destroys,
And drives on.
Play the game to the end, Kane.
Maybe this time.

Joe Schifino's first story about his intriguing new fantasy character, Lupus Lupolius, came about in a discussion with 'Kane' novelist, Karl Edward Wagner, at the first World Fantasy Convention in Providence. The upshot of it was that Joe castigated Wagner about big blonde barbarians riding south to raise Hell with swarthy Latin types. Joe then decided to write a story "...about a dashing dago who'd ride north to return the favour." The result was the first Lupus story, *The Lurkers and the Lost*. He has subsequently completed a number of further stories in the saga, including *Alter of Mars*, *Trial of the Wolf*, *Lair of the Wolf* and *Vengeance of the Wolf*. This latter tale was published in *Pulp: Fiction and Poetry* number 1 (Winter 1976). Work in progress includes more short stories and a Lupus Lupolius novel, *Transgression*. To introduce *Fantasy Tales* readers to the uncompromising character of Lupus, we present...

Bloodgold

By JOE R. SCHIFINO

Illustration by DAVID LLOYD

Prologue.

WITH long sure strokes, the lean, grey-haired figure ran a whetstone down the notched blade of his broadsword. Pausing on occasion to admire his well-worn weapon, his cold dark eyes scrutinized its razored edge. It was a good blade, one which had been bloodied in many an army and outlaw band, for the aging man honing it had lived a life brimming with battle and danger. But that had been years before, years when his eyes were sharp, ears keen and hands stone-steady. Years which long since had passed.

A tallow taper atop his crude table threw off flickering light that danced fleetingly along his gleaming blade. Its reflection, shining on the man's lined face, accented the weather-beaten aspect of his craggy features.

He placed down his broadsword and, sighing, stared at the rough-hewn rafters. His eyes travelled along the thick log walls and on across a hardwood floor worn smooth from generations of feet. At last his gaze came to rest upon a small shuttered window. Like a moth to a candle he was drawn, rising and rambling across the floor. At the

window he threw open the shutters, then, leaning on the sill, he stared into the night.

This was his inn, his life, the final bivouac for a wardog grown too old to bare fangs with the pack. Bought with his share of spoils from the sacking of a Harraford merchant train, the tavern was to have provided his security in his waning years. His eyes darted from stables to latrines, from slave quarters to inn proper, and he sighed once more.

"Lonns," came a soft low voice from across the chamber. The middle aged man, looking toward its source smiled whistfully.

"Lonns," repeated the gentle female voice, "you are too old for this."

"Hush," he replied. The tension in his voice eased as he gazed upon her face and bare shoulders.

"Hush?" she protested. "How can you hush me? I love you, you proud old fool."

Lonns grunted as he heaved his frame from the sill. She was right, though he would have been thrice-damned ere admitting it.

"Wife, a man must have some pride."

Her threadbare blanket slipped as she leaned forward, exposing a



"The Wolf of Provonia, renowned as a professional slayer."

firm bosom. She made no effort to cover herself.

"Lonns, I don't want to be a widow!"

"Enough, Tessie," he snapped, angered now that a wench might dare presume to question his will. "You were a bondwench and a whore when I found you..."

"Do you think I want to go back? End up a fur-sister because my man was too stubborn to see he was past his prime!"

Lonns flashed her an evil look. True, he no longer was as young as he once was, but she had no right to flaunt it.

"You do not understand." He turned and strode across the room. Pacing to and fro like a caged leopard, Lonns snarled his words venomously, "I thought this bloodfued ended a decade ago when I gutted that pig in Ithan. How the Hell did I know *anyone* could care enough about that miserable bastard to even give a damn? How, by Luna's Loins, *how?*"

Long blonde hair swishing,

Tessie sprang from their bed and scampered to her husband. She cupped his head, tears streaming down her comely face, and sobbed, "We can leave, we can always still leave!"

"Like a rat - like a hare running from a fox? Damn your soul to Hell, slut! Lonns of Ithan is no worm to cringe and flee from a dead man's whelp!"

With a drawn-out sigh and a shake of her head, Tessie stepped back as her man shoved her away. Storming about the room, clenching and unclenching his fists, Lonns looked the part of a tired old man faced suddenly with unexpected death.

His morbid thoughts raced like a thoroughbred stallion through his brain. He knew that Tessie was right. Lonns had recognized that truth two years earlier when he met her, collared and branded, in his newly purchased inn. He had been kind to her, and Tessie responded, coming to her new master's furs aflame with desire. It had

not been long after that he ordered her thralling removed. And soon he had made her both partner and wife. Although he was too loath to acknowledge it, Tessie's ardour had caused him to feel his age. Lonns freely had admitted that without her he could not have managed the inn nor - in rare moments of tenderness - his life. But now a grim and ugly spectre had risen from his past, threatening to destroy all their hopes and dreams. The ghost of an old blood feud, it was one thought long-over and abandoned in the dim memory of a decade past. Nonetheless, a lad then scarcely in his teens had come for him, albeit now a brute of a man and a skilled veteran as well...

Lonns of Ithan crushed his young wife to him. And for the first time in his life, he admitted fear. Tessie looked up and, seeing that his eyes too were tear-filled, touched her lips to his. With a surge of fire and fury, Lonns suddenly swept her up in his arms, revelling over how easy it still was as he bore her roughly to their bed. She drew him to her. Cradling his head to her bosom, Tessie professed herself as an outlet for his anger. And Lonns, drowning his frustrations in her, proved that he yet was a man...

THE summer sun had already passed its zenith when a hauberker rider reined his great stallion at a hitching post. From inside the tavern a pair of frightened blue eyes peered from behind barely opened shutters. The eyes of the innkeeper's wife, they noted the fluid cat-like grace of the warrior as he dismounted, and she wondered if this could be the anticipated harbinger of death. Tessie gazed upon the handsome features of the dark stranger, and she shook her head. He was too mature - and too pretty - to be the murderer. She watched as the olive-skinned outlander playfully caressed his horse ere turning to enter the inn. Running across the sawdust-covered floor, Tessie drew the bolt and then threw open the door at his first knock.

As the stout oak portal swung inward, the swarthy stranger was met by a sight both pleasant and thoroughly unexpected. Before him stood a barefoot wench, comely of face and form, with long golden braids which fell to her buttocks. His face lit up in a smile and he stepped inside. Tessie, blushing at his bold appraisal, felt flustered as she greeted him.

"Good day, traveler," she paused. There was a flutter in her belly that the lass found quite disconcerting. The outlander was a wiry, good-sized man who moved with the pent-up energy of a wolf. And even the heavy leather satchel and crossbow in his hands could not strip away his pure animal aura. His mail coat was battered, albeit well repaired, and from his broad, silver-studded girdle hung both poniard and sabre. Clearly this was a man who had seen many a field of battle.

"Welcome to my husband's inn." The newcomer nodded. He brushed past the innkeeper's wife and went directly to the bar. True, she was fair to look upon and brought a warmth to his loins, but the long trail had been hot and dusty. His mouth felt as if it had been the main thoroughfare of a lemming migration. With a sigh he dropped his sack by the iron footrail.

Thrusting a hand into the fur coin pouch at his belt, he drew forth a gold D'larr. "Wine - sour an' red, if yo' please, m'am."

With a puppet-like nod Tessie scurried behind the bar and sought a fresh skin. Pulling one down from a wooden peg, she poured him a brimming mug, then moved to replace the bladder. A strong brown hand, however, gripped her wrist, and she felt an almost-tangible flow of electricity.

"Tessie, you're married," she thought, angry at herself for experiencing such discomfort. Looking up at the mustached man, she tugged free her arm.

"You want the *whole* skin, sir?" Tessie finally asked, eyes averted and downcast.

"Yeah."

"Will that be all, sir?" she inquired. From the way in which he

looked at her, smouldering brown eyes seeming to strip away her garb stitch by stitch, the wench knew that hers had been a rhetorical question if ever there was one.

"Some food sure'd be nice," replied the warrior, pivoting on his heel and strutting to a corner table. There he lay his long scabbarded sabre across its top, and with a knee shoved his bundle beneath its legs. Scanning the vacant gathering room, he relaxed and settled back, sipping his wine to more fully savor it.

To his surprise the newcomer found his wine quite palatable. He had feared from the empty bar that the tavern's fare might be little better than swill. Looking toward the kitchen doorway, he could see the barmaid's back, and he paused in his drinking to admire the way her braids brushed her shapely bottom.

"Nice ass," he mused, "very nice ass."

When Tessie turned to bring his lunch, the outlander went back to his wine. She crossed the main floor, stepping nimbly around tables and chairs, until reaching his side. There she set a trencher of bread before him, one which had been heaped with mutton and cheese, butter and beef. And for dessert she placed down a small wooden bowl of cherries.

At the sight of the fruit, the stranger smiled and invited her to join him. She accepted graciously, pulling up a chair.

"What's yo'r name, gal?" he asked through a mouth crammed with flesh.

"Tessie, sir. And yours?"

"Lupus Lupolius."

Immediately her eyes darted to the silver, wolf-shaped hilt of his sword, and a look of awe filled her face.

"Not... not the Northeasterner?" she finally exclaimed.

"Lupus Lupolius, the Wolf of Provonian, if that's who yo' mean, that's who I am."

The Wolf of Provonian, renowned as a professional slayer, he had won great honour time and time again while battling Mongols before the gates of Duluth. His name was legend on the Westmark, and his

fame had spread throughout the embattled Western Kingdoms. He had been a leader among the mercenaries recently discharged by Ranar, Prince-Regent of Umbria and Morovia. As she stared wide-eyed at his swordhilt, Lupolius reached over and drew the weapon. From the oiled scabbard it glided, a peerless blue blade of Damascus steel, wrenched in hand-to-hand combat from the fist of a Mongol chieftain.

It was the weapon of a warrior-born.

The Provonian then magnanimously allowed her to fondle the silver wolfhead which was the pommel of his scimitar. He watched, a half-smirk on his face, as Tessie lingeringly touched the beautifully crafted butt.

"Lupus," she purred, fingers stroking the wolf's intricate mane. "Do you kill for pay?"

He half-gagged on his mutton and bread.

"On occasion, yeah."

She rested her hand on his wrist. Eyes locked, Tessie tried to discern just what kind of man he might be. All she saw, however, was a simmering anger, a barely repressed rage which could be set off at a moment's notice. She shuddered. But like a starling mesmerized by a snake, Tessie was unable to shake her morbid fascination for the man.

"Who yo' want snuffed?" probed Lupolius, idly popping a cherry into his mouth.

"A...a man..."

"No shit."

Tessie tried to compose herself. She was unsure whether her attraction to him was that of a woman, or something deeper and darker. At last she started to speak.

"There is someone...an enemy of my h...my husband," she hesitated at that word, and consciously wondered why, "a young soldier from Ithan, he wants to kill my man."

"What's yo'r pay?"

"One hundred D'larr, in silver."

Lupus Lupolius shook his head and munched another cherry. The mercenary had been offered less in his time, but not for more years than he cared to recall. Belching, he looked over the wench once more. He thought then of the time spent

on the trail, and how much of it minus a woman.

Reaching out his index finger, he gently traced a line from her lobe to her throat, and then down along the hem of her low-cut blouse.

"Yo'll hafta do better'n that."

Tessie trembled. She no longer could meet his gaze.

"We have little money..."

"That," interrupted Lupolius, "wasn't quite what I had in mind."

Her face turned a bright crimson and the butterflies in her belly now fluttered uncontrollably. She averted her face as the Provonian slowly slipped the peasant blouse down off her shoulders.

"No," Tessie whispered at last, "not 'til after my man is safe..."

LUPUS Lupolius, his horse since watered and fed, stabled and brushed, sat with his boots propped on a table by the unlit hearth. No longer was the gathering room empty, for with the coming of dusk townfolk closed their shops and a half-score had drifted to the inn for supper. Sitting in groups of two or three, the locals' voices were low and subdued, as if the topic of their collective conversation was close by. Frequently someone would hazard a glance in the mercenary's direction, though no one could long meet his seething gaze. The Wolf of Provonian, displaying a feral smile, gnawed a hambone. He sipped his wine frugally, all the while keeping a wary eye on the door.

Earlier that afternoon Tessie had wormed from her husband a vivid description of the vengeance-seeker. A quick-thinking lass, she then had slipped a powder into his food, leaving Lonns in a deep dreamless sleep. She in turn had spent most of the late afternoon conferring with the Provonian. Stressing to Lupolius that her husband was a fiercely proud old man, she insisted that the mercenary must never speak of their arrangement. Lupus Lupolius had only smiled. It was self-evident that this was not the sole part of their agreement which needed to be kept concealed...

Tessie, taking advantage of a lull in her customer's demands,

plopped into a chair at the outlander's table. As before, she found such close proximity caused her pulse to quicken.

"Don't appear that yo'r avenger plans on showin' up," remarked Lupolius. Sipping his wine, he seemed oblivious to her unease.

"He sent word that he'd come for Lonns at dusk..."

"Dusk was over two hours ago," interjected the Northeasterner. "I think maybe he got col' feet. After all, this is yo'r ol' man's turf..."

Lupolius' speculations were shattered abruptly as a sudden hush fell over the gathering room. Through the flung-open portals strode a great bull of a man, a behemoth of flesh, sinew and bone. Across his back was slung the composite bow of an Ithikan Ranger, while a sabre hung from his baldric. It was obvious from his buckskin garb and bow-legged gait that he had seen long service with that elite force of border scouts. Ithan, satellite of the United Kingdom of Cortia-and-Ithika, was famous as a staging area for the Rangers. And as such, it was only natural that the cream of Ithan's youth should have been recruited.

The surly stranger stormed to the bar. Glaring about defiantly, he slammed a huge fist against the polished mahogany.

"Where is the barkeep? Where is Lonns of Ithan!"

Tessie visibly shook with anger as she sprang to her feet. Kicking aside her fallen chair, she declared in a voice glacier-cold, "I am the barkeep!"

Brimming with assurance, he crossed the chamber with slow arrogant steps. He stopped scant inches from Tessie's flaring face and, suddenly lashing out, grabbed her by a braid.

"Where is Lonns? Tell me the truth, slut, 'fore I mark up your sow face!"

The innkeeper's wife, former thrall and fur-sister, was no novice to beatings or abuse. Born to the collar, Tessie had known pain since she had reached adolescence. She turned her head and swiftly sank sharp canines into the Ranger's wrist.

With a piercing howl, the Ithanian hurled her away, blood streaming from his fanged wound.

"Filthy whore!" he cursed. "No bitch bites Gangroff the Grim and lives to brag of it!"

But then the stern silent figure of a veteran warrior interposed himself between the brute and the wench. It was that of the Provonian mercenary."

Hands resting on his swordhilt, Lupolius sized up the man.

"Let 'er be."

Eyes wide with indignation, the beefy border scout snarled, "And who in Hell are you to tell Gangroff the Grim what to do?"

"Men call me Lupus Lupolius, the Wolf of Provonian."

"Provonian, eh? Step aside then, our towns are friends and allies. My quarrel is not with you..."

"Where I come from only a cur an' a coward beats on a woman."

Taking a step back, the Ithanian glared savagely at the slighter man. Gangroff's massive, ham-like hand jammed into the baskethilt of his sabre and his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

"You dig your grave with your mouth, Wolf..."

Lupus Lupolius, slayer and lover of great repute, felt the veneer of civilization peel from him, leaving naught but the basic predator beneath. No killer ape fresh off the savannah could have struck more fiercely nor savagely than he. Scimitar a blue blur as it streaked from his scabbard, it struck as if possessing a will of its own.

Slashing the scout's steel helm, the blade sent the skullcap soaring across the room. Ears ringing, the great brute sprang back, an oath on his lips and a sabre in his fist.

"Whore-loving dog!" he howled, charging the Provonian like an enraged bull. "I'll gut you like a rabbit!"

"Rabbit!" snarled Lupolius. His scimitar snaked out to parry the other's maddened cut, "Fo' that I kill yo' slow!"

The inn patrons scattered like sheep as the two killers met in midroom. The sheer size and strength of the scout was pitted against the peerless speed and reflexes of the

Northeastern warman. Cut and parry, thrust and block, each took measure of the other.

Lupolius, deflecting a blow aimed at his ribs, countered with a clean cut to his opponent's face. The burly Ithanian jerked back, albeit not quite enough. The blue-steel blade of the mercenary sheared the tip of his nose.

Yowling like a singed cat, Gangroff stumbled off in full retreat. The Wolf of Provonian, consumed by the warrior madness, pursued him relentlessly. The Ithanian desperately kicked at Tessie's toppled chair and sent it skidding along the floor. It smashed full into Lupolius' shins.

"Luna's Loins!" he cursed as he pitched over the broken furniture.

Rapidly rolling on his back, the Provonian - by sheer instinct - parried Gangroff's deathblow. The Ranger, blood and froth streaming down his chin, struck again and again at the prostrate mercenary. But like a beam of blue light, Lupolius' scimitar sliced and countered, once more driving the lumbering scout into a begrudged retreat.

The Wolf of Provonian made it first to his knees, and then to his feet, as his matchless blade wove a web of blue-steel death around him.

Try as he might, Gangroff was unable to finish his foe. He snarled and grimaced, cursing his failure even to wound the Provonian who had sprawled so helplessly exposed. It now had dawned on the Ranger that he might well be doomed. If he could not penetrate the mercenary's guard while Lupolius lay on his back, how could he hope to fare with the man on his feet?

The Wolf of Provonian bore in on his bulky opponent. Scimitar striking, he hewed through the Ranger's guard and cut deep into the hapless man's shoulder.

With a bellow of shock and pain, Gangroff recklessly strove to beat his way to the door. Despite the fury of his headlong rush, the Ranger was held at bay by the unflinching arm of Lupolius. Gangroff, step by hard-fought step, was herded like an errant calf through the tables and chairs. He struck rashly

now, laying about with heavy, bone-crushing blows that the mercenary easily slipped. Lupolius grinned. His face had transformed into that of a Death's Head. He thoroughly relished the anguish of his foe's dilemma, and he fully meant to stretch out his baneful pleasure.

Tessie watched, her mind a swirling maelstrom of mixed joy and horror. Arms clasped across her heaving bosom, she lapped her glistening lips with tiny, cat-like licks. Her entire body quivered in excitation. From the way the vengeance-seeker had mauled her, she well knew that his reprisal would not end with Lonns' death. To the victor belonged the spoils, and Tessie, trembling and wide-eyed, realised that they must needs include her. Had Gangroff the Grim triumphed, she would have fled like a doe into the night, but with Lupus Lupolius apparently the victor...

A look of pure panic filled the scout's face as he felt hard unyielding logs press against his spine. There could be no more retreat. Fear gripping his bowels, Gangroff hurled his entire body into a last desperate thrust. His sabre, lashing out like a cobra, glanced along the armoured ribs of the lithely twisting Provonian. Deliberately Lupus Lupolius had offered him an opening, relying on his unrivalled reflexes to dodge a fear-crazed thrust.

Gangroff, utterly off-balance, was a clean target for the mercenary's counterthrust. The Wolf of Provonian drove his blue blade through the scout's mailed corselet and on, between his floating ribs, till the scimitar's tip protruded a foot from Gangroff's opposite side.

Maw spread wide, yellow rotted teeth jutting from their gums, Gangroff the Grim stiffened and collapsed face-first in a crumpled heap. Awash in his own lifeblood, the skewered Ranger soon breathed his last...

LUPUS Lupolius quietly slid home the bolt on his chamber door. Then, with the silence of some

forest predator, he padded across the tiny room to where Tessie stood by his bed. Extending his arms, he directed the lass in how best to remove his hauberk. He found it unnecessary, however, for Tessie's years as a prostitute had left her an expert on such matters. She draped his mail coat over the back of a rough-hewn chair, then turned to face him.

In the gathering room below, once the warrior madness departed, Lupolius had cleared the chamber of townfolk. Driving them like cattle through the main entry, he then slammed shut and barred the heavy doors. Thereafter he had turned and looked upon the tow-headed wench, and in her glazed eyes saw a yearning as deep and abysmal as his own. Without a word he had dropped a hand on her shoulder and, spinning her half-around, pointed to the staircase that led to his bed chamber. Tessie's heart had pounded like a smithy's sledge as she walked soundlessly to the steps and on to the room above...

The Wolf of Provonian took her face in his strong brown hands and kissed her. Tessie felt the probe of his tongue - hard, fierce, seemingly raping her mouth. She felt a rush of blood to her loins and her knees went weak. A shudder ran through her. He slid his tongue along her throat; he glided it along her shoulders and neck, then up to her lobes. The wench was aroused already by the savage blood-letting of which she indirectly had been the cause. And his tauntingly slow teasing merely heightened her passion.

Lupolius took her peasant blouse and, wrenching it down over her shoulders, bunched it about her belly. He crushed her to him, hands gripping and gliding along her flesh. Feverishly she unlaced her skirt and yanked down her petticoat. Grinding against him, she moaned audibly, no longer the properly submissive wife of a respected town burgher. Lupolius had touched her core, had unearthed the sensual slave-girl whom Tessie thought long since buried. Lonns was a good husband, an ample provider, but she

previously had belonged - body and soul - to her first master. A hot-blooded, athletic man, he had accustomed her to vigorous bouts of love. And two years with an aging mate who, as often as not, rolled over and went to sleep had left Tessie ripe for a man such as Lupolius.

The Wolf of Provonia threw her across his bed. Mattress ropes straining, he lowered himself on her. He did not even doff his breeches, simply tearing them open.

"All-Mother," she murmured as he took her, "for...forgive me..."

Thrilled and eager from the bloodshed, Tessie peaked almost at once. Lupolius grinned. He had known such wenches before, they whose sheathes dripped at the sight of red ruin, especially when done over them. He rode her brutally, a warman having his way with a bond-wench. And she, compliant, submissive, responded yet more to his aggression.

As she neared her second peak, she started to scream and moan, nails raking Lupolius' back from shoulders to buttocks. Two years of repressed yearning had burst asunder like a dam, and her animal passion raged like a storm-tossed sea.

Then, when Lupolius neared his own peak, there came a sudden crash as the bolted door flew inward amidst a shower of splintered boards.

Standing silhouetted in the door-frame, broadsword brandished, was Lonns of Ithan. Face screwed up in a sensate rage, he fairly foamed as he roared, "Slut! Whore! Is *this* why you drugged me?"

"Oh Luna, no!" she cried, her protests lost in the ensuing chaos. Crazy with jealousy, Lonns

sprang forward, lifting his broadsword for a deathblow. Lupolius, wrenching himself from the suddenly still wench, shot his seed across her bared belly. Lonns' sharp steel arced down and the horrified husband barely had time to turn its cutting edge.

Struck full across her hips by the flat of his blade, Tessie loosed a shrill yelp and hurled herself, terrified, from the bed. Lupolius reached down for the wolfpommel hilt of his scimitar. With a single swift motion he drew it from his scabbard and whipped the blue-steel blade across the old wardog's gullet.

Lonns' broadsword clanged against the floor as he flung both hands to his gashed throat. He tried to curse his tormentor, but naught save a hideous gurgling rose from his crimsoned lips. Lurching to and fro, he swayed like an elm beneath a woodcutter's axe. Blood pouring down his breast and belly, the old man crashed against the crude chair and fell heavily to the floor. Legs twitching, eyes rolling in his head, the tenacious veteran clung to life for what seemed an eternity.

"Noooo!" shrieked Tessie. Howling and wailing, she draped herself over his gory form and tried to stem the flow of blood with her golden tresses...

The lass was still hunched and weeping when Lupolius had finished garbing and gathering his gear. With barely a backward glance, the Wolf of Provonia strode over the threshold, pouch contents pouring into his palm. And as he headed down the corridor, Tessie could discern his voice faintly underlying the jingle of coin.

"...thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four..."

NEXT ISSUE

A weird and uncanny story by two masters of the macabre

THE THING IN THE MOONLIGHT

BY H. P. LOVECRAFT & BRIAN LUMLEY

in the next issue of

FANTASY TALES

FANTASY CROSSROADS #14

continues the round-robin novel based on a Robert E. Howard fragment. The two new chapters are "The Mouth Of The Earth" by Darrell Schweitzer and "The Gods Defiled" by A. E. van Vogt. Previous chapters appeared in **FC #10/11** (\$5), **#12** and **#13** (\$3 each) with chapters by Karl Edward Wagner, Joseph Payne Brennan, Richard Tierney, Michael Moorcock, Charles Saunders, Andrew J. Offutt and Manly Wade Wellman. The latest two chapters of "Ghor, Kin-Slayer" are illustrated by Britisher John Stewart and **FC** staffer Stephen Riley. Don't miss the latest installment of the adventures of Ghor.

Other material includes a new Inmaro story, "The Curse Of The Bana-Gui", by Charles Saunders. The 14,000 word tale is illustrated by John Stewart, who makes his artistic debut in **FC** this issue. John's work is very detailed. You'll be amazed at the craftsmanship of his work.

Steven G. Mitchell also contributes an unusual little tale called "The Garden Of Old Night". This issue finally sees the publication of a four plate "Nudes" portfolio by Kenneth Smith. Smith's work has recently been highlighted in **SORCERERS** and **ARIEL**. Stephen Riley introduces the portfolio with an appreciation of the man and the teacher.

Another long awaited feature is the beginning of the serialization of **GIZZLESTINES** and **GOBLIN ROSES** in **FC**. The book includes unpublished verse and letters written by the late fantasy artist Hannes Bok. This installment features a very unusual and thought provoking letter by Bok to his friend Roger Robinson, plus four previously unpublished poems. **GIZZLESTINES** is amply illustrated and decorated by Stephen Riley and Richard Huber Jr. Further, the cover of **FC #14** is by Stephen Fabian and based on a Hannes Bok sketch.

The 44 page magazine also includes verse by W. Paul Ganley, H. Warner Munn, J. E. Coplin, Robert E. Howard and C. C. Norton; plus illustrations by Ken Raney Jr., Dave Sim, Gene Day; a letter from Michael Moorcock, Ramblings and more.

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This anthology, titled **OMNIUMGATHUM**,

FANTASY CROSSROADS



THUM, presents new verse by Mervyn Peake, Robert E. Howard, H. Warner Munn, James Wade, Tevis Clyde Smith, Richard Tierney, Frank Belknap Long, L. Sprague de Camp, Cliff Eddy, Munel Eddy, Joseph Payne Brennan, John Bredon (Steve Eng), William Hope Hodgson, Hannes Bok, Andre Norton, Andrew J. Offutt, Edith Ogutsch, Winona Morris Norton, Brian Lumley and A. E. van Vogt.

In addition, **OMNIUMGATHUM** presents obscure or out of print verse by Nelson S. Bond, Henry S. Whitehead, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Eddy C. Bertin, August Derleth, Clark Ashton Smith, Kenneth Patchen, Alan Moss, Harry Warner Jr., Stanley Weinbaum, A. Merritt, Emil Petaja, Lewis Carroll, Manly Wade Wellman, P. Shuyler Miller, Lucile Coleman and Ramsey Campbell.

That's still not a complete listing because it neglects versifiers like Gordon Larkin, Paul Anderson, Andrew Darlington, Michael Moorcock, Donald Sidney-Fryer, and Roger Zelazny.

The 1976 anthology includes illustrations by Hannes Bok, Stephen Fabian, Gene Day, Stephen Riley, Clyde Caldwell, Jeff Easley, Randy Mohr, Bernie Englund, Richard Huber Jr., and Charles Vess.

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This is A. J. Silvonijs' second published story. His first, *King Amphitrites and the Hierophant* appeared in the British Fantasy Society's journal *Dark Horizons* 17 (Summer 1977). *At Last the Arcana Revealed* is a fascinating and thought-provoking fantasy and the author tells us it forms one chapter of a novel which he is re-working at the moment. However, Mr. Silvonijs points out that this chapter is a story told by one of his characters and was meant to stand on its own. We think you will agree that it does indeed speak for itself...



"His unwelcome guest was accompanied by a species of shadow."

At Last the Arcana Revealed

By A. J. SILVONIJS

Illustration by SIMON HORSFALL

WITH the dignity of an antique ritual the acolyte moved facelessly around the table, filling the goblets one by one. In the peace of the Midnight Court all sat quiet and still, reflecting on what they had heard and retelling it in silence. The tale had satisfied them, and any comment voiced aloud would have sounded harshly in the air of

lingering illusion. At the far end of the table the man in black impassively surveyed their faces - Ioris Wheelwright and Ashmel Bellman, the Waywiser and the Shipsmith and the rest - and smiled behind his impassivity. Despite the walls of engraven marble and the windows that in four directions looked upon the black abyss of endless night, the room

was warm with the breath of wine. One or two of the company had begun to doze, whilst Alexay Nailsmith stared meditatively at some indiscernible speck in the depths of his Falernian. Silence in their hands became a mighty weapon, arresting time itself.

"A fine tale," one of them at length remarked, venturing the words upon the silence.

"Indeed, a fine tale," said the Bellman appreciatively. "But surely you are not the last? Who is there left to speak? Alexay, have we heard from you?"

"Mine was the tale of the Crimson Fencer, and of his downfall in the city of Pirathidion the Great," Alexay answered, a trifle hurt. "I bad thought it not so easily forgotten."

"Of course, of course," the Bellman hastily appeased him. "My memory is confused by such a plentitude of wonders."

"And wine," observed another maliciously.

"True enough!" the Bellman conceded, and amid laughter went on, "The Timewright! You are the one remaining, Opas Timewright - round off our entertainment with a fiction of your own."

Again the man in black obscurely smiled, nodding momentarily to himself, but refrained from joining in the encouraging cries of "The Timewright!" which resounded from the polished walls. Modest but far from unwilling, Opas gave a gesture of surrender.

"I cannot hope to cap your tales," he said with knowing diffidence, and glanced about the table. Although all eyes were naturally upon him, he sensed especially the unrelenting gaze of the man in black. Opas took care not to look in his direction.

"I know but the one story," he protested apologetically. "It is called 'The Legend of the Grand Illusionist'."

"And a good one it will be," the Linkman added, signalling for Opas' glass to be replenished.

"It is the history of a certain man," Opas began, "by the name of ...well, let us call him Quill." He paused for a moment or two in

order to arrange his thoughts.

QUILL was a man of scholarship and erudition, a solitary man who seldom felt the need to seek the company of his fellow-men. Alone he lived and worked, and alone he intended to remain for fear of betraying his craft. All around, the life of the City teemed and thrived and flourished, while high above in his room beneath the crenellations of the glistening tower that rose like a tusk above the City, Quill the craftsman toiled by night and slept by day in defiant independence. Yet his travail was rewarded by the citizens, and his perversity condoned by the goddess of the City, who considered that he served her as well here in his splendid isolation as he would by regularly attending the ceremonies before her shrine.

So he laboured unremittently at those things for which the Fates had equipped him. Always on his own he conjured and created and performed the tricks of his trade with ink and parchment. He had chosen for his raw material the past, and was forever lost therein. To survey the expanse of streets, walls and gardens, of buildings private and public, from his weather-beaten casements was to glimpse the surface of the past; to watch the manifold celestial bodies circling through the night was to see directly into the far recesses of the past; to look beyond the walls of the ancient sandstone City and the ugly faubourgs lying outside was to view the past in still inexorable action. He could see it in the river, for down the wide, flat, verdant valley it flowed, between at first the infinite acres of primal forest and then the ancestral fields of the City dwellers, before it swept around the rocky knoll whereon the acropolis had been erected long ere the memory of the citizens began. On the horizon, meanwhile, rose the ageless mountains, where eagles nested and wolves, bears and divers evil daemons lurked. Pinned down by the arching sweep of the sun the land could not escape the sempitern-

nal past. Blind to his destiny Quill conjured and created, shaped and sharpened, shaped and reshaped. Thus it was one evening that from the dark and volatile haze of his imagination there stepped the elegant figure of Mephistopheles.

In silence Quill regarded his nocturnal visitor, while the latter strutted unconcernedly about the room and poked his long, thin nose wherever its presence was not invited. There was, so to speak, a stretched appearance to him: very tall and very slender, with fingers longer and whiter than Quill had ever seen on a man before, he emphasised his needle-like mien by wearing a long slim coat over sparsely tailored breeches. All that he wore was black and expensive, and to startling effect contrasted with the porcelain whiteness of his skin. His face was angular and pointed, and his scalp showed unpleasantly through the meagre, receding hair. He gripped an ebony cane which almost measured his length and which he rapped on the floor with the regularity of a clock as he inquisitively examined everything in sight, aimlessly picking things up and putting them down again. Although Quill had carved so many figures in his lonely room in the tower, he had never felt before the sudden doubt that now crept up on him, for this one seemed to have usurped his imagination, being somewhat more than he had anticipated. Moreover, his increasingly unwelcome guest was accompanied by a species of shadow, or, as it were, a space in the air, which hovered a little above, behind and to one side of Mephistopheles and which resembled Mephistopheles himself insofar as it resembled anything at all. He knew the Psychopomp at once and observed him glumly as Mephistopheles tapped out the passing of time.

Not a word said Quill despite his visitor's arrogance, and not a word said Mephistopheles. There was an utter stillness in the room that permeated everything to its living or lifeless core. It occurred to Quill that he was hearing not the successive taps of the cane, but the one impact unendingly

and timelessly repeated. Looking forlornly around him, he was immediately confronted by the arched black rectangle of the window; it was as hopelessly impenetrable as the mist of disbelief that curled and swirled about him, yet still in his darkening vision ink, pen and parchment were clear before him, as though they were illuminated by an inner light peculiar to themselves. Then gradually his confidence returned, so that a certain vanity - surprised, admittedly, but vanity nonetheless - displaced that which had been but a sharp and stinging fear of his own circean powers. Therewith his head again began to fill with words and questions, and at last his tongue was freed.

In a somewhat stiff and brittle voice he enquired what it was that Mephistopheles desired.

Suddenly the mesmeric tapping ceased and the intruder turned, as though for the first time conscious of Quill's presence.

"You mean to say that you cannot tell?" he answered in a voice lean, lank and starved. He beamed insofar as his stringy features would allow.

"No," said Quill in a wary whisper.

"Now let us consider the matter in the light of common sense," said Mephistopheles, assuming all at once an air of bonhomie, and gesturing expansively. "I was summoned, and here I am. There is nobody else in the room. The next move is yours."

Letting his extraordinary cane support his weight, he stood casually upon one leg; the Psychopomp thought this was a fine idea and followed suit. Quill was only momentarily at a loss, for before his eyes there danced glittering the vision of opportunity.

"What can you do for me?" he cautiously asked.

"Anything, my friend!"

"Anything," Quill repeated ruminatively.

For no apparent reason Mephistopheles began to peer suspiciously beneath the furniture; the Psychopomp evidently shared his apprehensions, for he also bent low

towards the floor. Still the vision danced its tantalising dance.

"There is no limit to your power?"

"Well, it all depends on what you mean by limit," he temporised, "or power...but for all practical purposes - as far as you are concerned, that is - there is little point in quibbling over such a minor detail."

"I must be certain," said Quill half to himself, "because that for which I long - which I must have, no less - is no trivial thing."

Stooping suddenly, so that Quill could hear the cracking of his joints, Mephistopheles stared into his face and said, "I shall be the judge of that, my friend."

Involuntarily Quill recoiled, seeing afresh how flat a hue were the eyes of his uninvited visitor. Moreover, in spite of the proximity of the attenuated face thrust into his, no scent of breath or skin, no odour of his presence, reached Quill's nostrils. Inwardly upon his mind's ear, however, a sour note was grating, cautionary and painful. Up-ending the hourglass Mephistopheles observed the dribbling sand and said, "There is time for a demonstration. You see, out of nothing I have created as much time as I require."

It seemed to him that Quill was not convinced.

"But here is a better demonstration," he continued undeterred.

At once Quill was aware that Mephistopheles had lost his gaunt and gangling look, his insect limbs and etiolated visage suddenly expressing a tense, unyielding concentration. Words of enchantment he could be seen to mouth, although no sound was heard, and almost sensually he ran one hand the length of his cane. His manner, adamant and pitilessly intent, was so disquieting that Quill could do no more than watch, holding his breath and conscious now of the deep night chill, as Mephistopheles neatly balanced his cane upon its metal tip. It swayed a little but did not fall; even then it seemed rather more than a simple feat of co-ordination and muscle control. More noticeably than before the

room had filled with silence, empty and echoing, resonant with departed music.

Without warning there was a wavering of the shape in front of him, a trembling in the lamplight, a sudden amorphousness...and then there was nothing but a little scuttling beast upon the floor. The dim light glinted on its scales. Quill, on bending forward to examine it, found himself repelled by an immanence of evil which he could liken to nothing in his experience. He started back in fright. The creature scurried wildly about, its claws clicking out a light but sinister tattoo upon the naked boards, and then of a sudden the eldritch rattling ceased, Quill stepping back instinctively as the atrocious little animal took wing - leathery pinions whirring drily - plunged into the inkwell, crept malefically across a sheet of virgin parchment, and sprayed the room with ink as it soared towards the ceiling. There it clung for a moment, buzzing loudly as its wings flayed and fouled the surface. Then, lifted from its own world and thrust unwilling into another, parallel and alien, it waxed dangerous and resentful, so that Quill's angry movement and sharply audible indrawn breath disturbed it. Darting down too quickly for the eye to follow, it grazed Quill's face before he could evade it and vanished underneath the furniture. Between Quill's fingers there dripped a trickle of blood onto the parchment, blending with the inky tracks as though it bled from the wound of its defloration. Dazed and disbelieving, Quill saw in the glass a frightening gash, starting just below the eye. Only after Mephistopheles had applied some styptic remedy did he come to himself again.

"So that is the extent of your power?" he asked, respect inevitably mingled with a certain bitter indignation. He noticed that Mephistopheles, smiling desolately, now held the stick in his languid grip once more.

"No," he replied, and the smile, bleak as the wasted lands that lie between men and the ivory city of

the gods, fell mask-like away.

"No, that is the extent of my weakness. I should not have given in. It is the ineluctable fate of the gods to be tempted by the wiles and guile of men. There is no trust in man, and we are seduced from our path."

In the deadened stillness of the room it seemed to Quill that a rebuke had been administered. Shame assailed him.

"There is no need for this," he muttered wearily, fingering with exploratory care the rawness of his injury. "I know you, Mephistopheles, and I have never mistrusted you. Nevertheless, you undercut my confidence... Time I had on my hands, malleable and yielding, until you came to me, but now I merely see how inadequate and futile is that power of mine. I had faith in my gifts: I aimed to split those temporal bonds asunder - to overcome the ignorance, myopia and misted overview of humankind. To me time past was never irretrievable, for it has always haunted me. Whatever others have attempted and endured, surely I deserve more than that? Try me," he challenged Mephistopheles, "test me. Surely my hopes are not vain?"

"Simple the hopes," Mephistopheles intoned. "All your forebears wanted just that mastery." He slowly shook his head. "Yet so few, so very few, deserved or justified it. That they were unable to accept their moral lot is quite irrelevant. They had to pass on their way - I could do nothing for them. I was not sorry," he added thoughtfully, "it was merely arrogance on their part."

With ostentatious skill he twirled the stick around his pallid fingers, then suddenly jabbed it at the floor. Quill started. Mephistopheles dislodged a squidged and shapeless spider from the ferrule of the cane.

"No extra charge for pest extermination," he commented. "If it is of any comfort to you, I see no immediate ground for despair. You seem to have a greater - what shall we say? - sympathy with the essence of the past than had your proud ancestors."

Now a slight smell of charring was discernible and appeared to emanate from the stick, although its owner evidently did not, or chose not to notice it.

"You must know the tale of the Cobalt Warrior," he said, squatting on the table. The bending of his emaciated limbs was not only outlandish but inexplicably unsettling. "A splendid fighter, as you are no doubt aware, but what thoughts were they that possessed him as he fought in the Forest of Norray on the isle of Westershelm, as he wrestled single-handed with the Black Dragon of the Prägnavenstifens, as he challenged all the daemons in the Everlasting Lands to blast him out of this and any other sphere...? I will tell you: all that he wanted was that his name should be remembered. Simple the hopes..."

He slapped the table in an access of impatience; the silhouette of his slender hand darkly lingered when he lifted it.

"But he *is* remembered," Quill innocently argued.

"He is not easily forgotten. His descendants are everywhere to prove it. Besides he was never mindful of whose side it was on which he fought. That is no way to counter the reality of time."

"So I allowed the Psychopomp to take him. He and I did not see eye to eye. I was always more sympathetic towards Geraan Vastèrèth - Geraan the Magnificent, Defender of the Windring, Master of the Gramond Knights - no one can know more than a tithe of his innumerable titles. From every quarter, from the most far-flung emirates and satrapies, he collected honours and decorations, while gold, more gold and yet again more gold were heaped upon him. In short, he tried to build about himself a mighty edifice from the reverence of his fellow-men - so mighty indeed that the foundations of time itself would be undermined. Then one day someone peeped inside, and it was empty." Mephistopheles shook his head regretfully. "Simple the hopes... And the Psychopomp led him away."

"Where?"

"Who knows? The realms of shadowed darkness? That can only be *his* secret."

Idly on the table Mephistopheles outlined a hideous troll; it clambered to its feet and stretched itself, then, toppling off the edge, fell to the floor and broke its neck.

"And there was Ahilder Tilman," Mephistopheles continued, "who had other ways of defying the transitory power of time and who for his multifarious and attractive sins was hanged on gilded gallows. And Witchfinder, Carnifex and Crookfoot watched in silence that was more than eloquent as the Psychopomp arrived to guide him down unknown paths.

"And there was - you must recall - Small Dancer of sweet, enchanted memory, lithe and beautiful and stricken by a star, who danced from one end to the other of the wide Cymbolion, searching for the entrance to her dream." Mephistopheles sighed, and then glanced slyly at Quill. "She danced before viziers and archons, she danced in front of kings and consuls, she danced in the very presence of the old heresiarch, who said that he had never seen the like, and died... but she never realised until she saw the Psychopomp that so intangible an art died with her. Simple the hopes..."

Stronger now was the smell, and Quill recognised the scent of scorching wood. A wisp of smoke could be seen curling upward. At the same time Mephistopheles grasped the situation and hurled his smouldering stick out of the window.

Seized by a paralysing fear, Quill was abruptly aware that no longer was there glass in the window frames, but only a velvet blackness, inenarrable, ineffable. Without the windows there was merely nothingness, a stark opacity, a black abysm. The words were strangled in his throat, and he listened helpless to his visitor's monologue, a rondo deep and cunning in the night.

"Each one of these was a great disappointment to me. It was so unedifying to watch, for they let

themselves down with no assistance whatever on my part. Very little, anyway. Disheartening it was. I suspect, however" - he glanced with a keen and questing eye at Quill - "that you are up to me, if I may so express it." The gaunt, cross-legged figure winked incongruously.

"And there was Ormirrion the One and Only, who led the Grand Crusade. At least he was possessed of an incomparable ambition, for the desire to change the world is nothing less than that. Nonetheless, for the same reason he was but a usurper, and had to learn that he would never be able to master the past by burying it.

"I should have better liked the efforts of Vanstepping the eternal gambler, had he not elected to gamble with his own destiny, and thus with time itself. It was obvious from the start that he would lose on the final throw. Simple the hopes..."

Mephistopheles unwound his legs painstakingly and began to pace the room.

"Where was I? At times I become a little confused. That is the disadvantage of timeless memory. *You* must sympathise - *you* know the power that animates the past." He nodded meaningfully.

"But I want it under my control, not unpredictable and random."

"I was not thinking. It is a weakness of mine - inexcusable, I know, but that is the way we are made.

"It is the way they were all made. They would not think - they could only see so far. You must have heard tell of Meriás the Pilgrim, who calmly took it on himself to lead the priests and hierophants upon the road to affirmation. How they crossed the Amarthian Mountains, how they valiantly passed the Sentinels of Sleth, is now the stuff of legend, but what end did it serve?"

"It was a demonstration of the potency of faith," Quill replied defensively. "It was sad that they should perish before they reached their goal."

"The sadness lies in those who do not see that the Pilgrim knew not where he was going. Time did

not lie in that direction. Simple the hopes... When he met the Pyschomp he recognised his error.

"Nor is Arbellan unknown to you."

"Commonly called the Free Way Wagoner?"

"The same. Carting and carrying, haggling and chaffering, he would travel alone from one end of the world to the other, and sometimes further still. Trading and transporting - it may not be the noblest of professions, but whether he bought goods or gossip, the doors would open notwithstanding. Yet although the frontiers fell before him, he never realised that his view of the world encompassed only three dimensions. Still was there one wherein all his powers were to no avail, but he knew it not. Simple the hopes..."

Having returned to the table, Mephistopheles had with evidently practised skill given himself to the execution of disgusting drawings. Quill grimaced and, shifting his weight uncomfortably though surreptitiously, tried to disguise his fearful unease. Where Mephistopheles was leading him he was quite without a clue, but undeniably he was winding the trumpets of despair; Quill, gripped by a dark, disabling numbness, heard the sound and shuddered. He was conscious that the gaunt man's powers knew no limit, and the consciousness transfixed him. Even as he brooded in a mood of hopelessness Mephistopheles made as if to conjure from the black and dismal nothingness without the window something new in the way of unpleasantness, but seemingly thought better of it and thrust his arm into the void itself. A moment later he was drawing a stick into the room; Quill noticed that, being shorter and with a dog's-head knob, it was not the original one. Mephistopheles leaned nonchalantly upon it, gazing at Quill with equanimity. That he should remain so utterly unmoved, that his strength and gramarye should be so unimaginably boundless, was odious and chilling, and plunged Quill in despond.

Nonetheless, he found it unacc-

ountable in the extreme that Mephistopheles' scorn should apparently not extend to Quill himself. Indeed, he realised, Mephistopheles throughout had looked on him with approbation; inner beacons flared. Now, on a fresh impulse, he turned to the window again and produced a second, identical, dog-headed stick, which he offered to Quill forthwith. Instantly a horrendous loathing and a darkling, atavistic fear reverberated to the ends of Quill's beleaguered mind; illogically the proffered stick not only symbolised but was the source of Mephistopheles' contemptuous and devastating power. Shivering in horror, he tried to speak but could only shake his head. He was helplessly aware that Mephistopheles' thin features were contorted, furious at this rejection. Enraged he slashed the table with his stick; it fell in two, the fractured edges smouldering gently.

"Ingrate!" he snarled threateningly. "You have summoned me only to fling an insult in my face, yet I came because I knew you to be one in the faith with me - to have achieved the true obsession. Why do you not understand that long ago you passed the test?"

Mephistopheles was advancing with apparent menace; Quill backed away and with a warning gesture grabbed an inkwell.

"There is no retreat for you," said Mephistopheles. There was no menace in his voice, but it was cold and low and toneless. "It is long since you had the chance to turn back along that steep and narrow way."

On a sudden from outside there came a sound that sheared through the tower room like an icy cataract. For an instant all was frozen, preserved in a timeless of crystal. Then simultaneously they knew the muezzin's call, awakening the City. In the very second that Quill hurled the inkwell at Mephistopheles, the latter threw himself with spidery ungainliness toward the window. Shattering behind him, the inkwell spread its contents down the wall. Only when Mephistopheles had leapt into the lightless, black infinitude did

Quill observe the words into which the trickling ink mysteriously had run.

As though it were the last resounding revelation he read and marked them: "In the corner of the circle seek the gateway".

How subtle, how succinct! At last the arcana revealed! How quintessential that imperative! How subtle...and how cryptic... Even to himself he durst not confess that such a majestic statement held no meaning for him. Although Mephistopheles had vanished he sprang towards the window, but so urgent was his haste that his legs betrayed him and he tripped, sprawling awkwardly across the low sill. Split and splintered glass fell in fragments, little pieces of melody tinkling into silence. The momentum of his fall unbroken by the window, Quill clutched vainly at the frame, jagged with the anchored edges of the pane. In the cool dawn light the earth surged up to meet him and the City stretched its arms of sandstone out towards him.

ALTHOUGH the narrative was at an end, the company seemed reluctant to trespass on the illusion and to break the Timewright's spell. Absent-mindedly the Bellman picked at the remnants of the food, while others slowly drained their goblets, as though to fill the passing moments. Ioris Wheelwright summoned the acolyte from the farthest reaches of his trance. The man in black directed an approving nod at Opas Timewright, who fixed his eyes with determined self-effacement on the table.

"There is the rough unshapen block," Cariel Carving said at length, "from which legend can be hewn and sculpted."

"It stirs me, Heriac," said the Shipsmith generously to the Way-wiser, "even more than yours."

"So it ought," said another, "for if I mistake not we see the Grand Illusionist before us."

A silence pervaded the Midnight Court. Though as new to them in the telling as any other world sprung from an illuminated corner of the imagination, the Timewright's

tale with this last exposure caused no expression of surprise. That Opas himself was the Grand Illusionist came as the last splendid cadence that completes and seals the piece.

At the end of the table the man in black rose almost ominously to his feet. A stranger would have remarked at once that he was unusually tall and thin, the one set off by the other, and looked as though a few meals like this would have done him no harm at all. Some of the assembly were visibly unsettled by this action, others shewed a willing deference seemingly at odds with the lively and glaucous spirit wherewith the entertainment had been conducted.

"Exceedingly shrewd," said Mephistopheles sarcastically, "to identify so rapidly the subject of the story." At least the Bellman was able to manage a pained smirk, but he was made of stronger mettle than the others. Even the servitor seemed uneasy. "Not one of you is ignorant of the illimitable and fathomless gifts of Opas Timewright. That you envy him, I know, yet I knew what I was about when I brought him to the Midnight Court - so monstrously was he obsessed by his awareness of the past and the manifold workings of malleable time that he had long since earned his place. Here you move and have your being favoured timelessness, and your memories are blind to that strength before which time itself will piteously scream and squirm. For him the roiling vortex of the past was no malefic trick of Fate - an existential snare, you might well say, or riddle perhaps - but the narrow way itself that would lead him into gateway worlds, which in turn would draw him into those that lie unglimped and unimaginable beyond. How many are those of you who can so enter their illusions and lose themselves therein? You aristocrats, born into the Midnight Court, must ask yourselves whether you still cherish such a capacity for obsession. Haunted as he was, his hopes were never simple; indeed, it was his weird to wander without respite in their labyrinth, ever finding his

way inexorably to the centre."

In the face of this assault not one of them durst speak, only setting eyes upon him when he had turned away from them and walked across to the nearest window. Without a word he stared into the ebon depths. Gradually the others clustered round him.

Through the cosmos wheeled in soundless flight the evanescent worlds of their imaginations. Given shapes and substance, their passing phantasies sped whirling down the path of ageless aeons.

At length one of the watchers spoke.

"It is time," said the Bellman,

"for us to retire. Maybe to-morrow ..."

In the stygian mirk the lights of all their little worlds were suddenly extinguished.

Yet, through epochs of a dim remoteness inconceivable, one of them swept onward still. Opas Timewright watched it glimmering in the void. Now for all eternity unreachable, it hurtled blindly on with an impetus acquired long ago in the realms of his unbridled thoughts. Lingered at the window he listened to the laughter of the daemon who in some former age had malevolently deprived him of the power to censure and abort his phantasies.



Mausoleum

By GORDON LARKIN

How might a dreamer die, his fancy thus decree
all he has wept...a monument.
And tourists of these vaults have seen no worm deny
his feeling for...the firmament.
Never endless kingdoms prey upon this page,
a stealthy step across that frame,
Nor all the phantom of his brow, soft butterfly-horde,
weirdly wondrous, dancing dame
Expire in ageless dusts, a stellar tapestry
across your sky...his testament.
Songs hugely sung and drawn, his magic breath will linger
your world his host...a sacrament.

Behold eyes that love thy hands proclaim
Only miss it not and stand in shame
King's insight to beggar disdain.

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Dreams of a Dark Hue

edited by jon harvey



DREAMS OF A DARK HUE is an entirely new venture for Spectre Press. It is more than just an anthology of fiction; it is more than just a paperback - it is an illustrated paperback collection, containing a rare treat of horror fiction and poetry. This large size paperback contains five superb stories:

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The Sea is My Bed by Eddy C Bertin - We all have a certain affinity towards the sea; but Mark Verhaeben did not know how much an affinity he had inherited from the room's previous occupant.

All in the Appearance by Gregory Fitz Gerald - "For the first time, I noticed my own nakedness. I sit down at the desk, as much to hide my nakedness as to set to work. Work? My purpose is to search. Yes, search, but for what?"

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CTHULHU

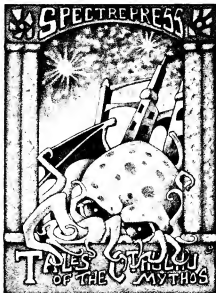
Since its birth, over 40 years ago, the *Cthulhu Mythos* has caught the imagination of both Fantasy readers and writers all over the world. It has become more than just a device for fiction. Created by H.P. Lovecraft, it is now considered an fact by numerous occultists, who search for the author's alleged 'source' of his stories.

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WELCOME to our fourth issue of *Fantasy Tales*. We would like to thank all of you who responded to our request last issue for direct subscriptions. Most of our sales are through Specialist Bookdealers, which means we have to give a discount on copies sold through these outlets. This in turn reduces our ability to finance forthcoming issues as quickly as we would like. Direct subscriptions do help put that little bit extra cash into our hands immediately. Perhaps more of our readers would like to consider the advantages of an advance subscription to issue 5? Copies will be mailed to you as soon as it is published (Price is 72p, which includes postage and packing, or in the USA \$2.50).

We were pleased to find ourselves nominated for a World Fantasy Award, which was presented at the 4th World Fantasy Convention, held in Fort Worth, Texas, over the 12th - 16th October, 1978. Although we didn't pick up the award, we'd like to congratulate Robert Weinberg, a good friend of *Fantasy Tales*, for winning in the 'Special Award: Non-pro' category. The statuette, incidentally, is a large, stylised bust of H. P. Lovecraft, sculpted by artist Gahan Wilson.

As we mentioned last issue, *Fantasy Tales* number 1 is now out of print, but there is still a dwindling stock of both numbers 2 and 3. If this is your first copy of FT, you can order each of the back numbers at the original cover price of 60p plus 12p postage and packing (\$2.50 USA). Please send your remittance to the London address on page 1 of this issue.

It is good to know that there is still a demand for a magazine of

this type. And as for the future... well, with number 5 we are planning a few changes (more about this next issue), but of course there will be more of the usual, quality fiction which has graced the pages of FT in the past. This also goes for the artwork and layout design; FT although unashamedly inspired by *Weird Tales* (as any reader of that old pulp will immediately see), is not simply a 'tribute' item, but is a serious publication attempting to bring into print for your enjoyment new stories of Fantasy and Horror along with the occasional reprint. Talking about WT, our nostalgia for that magazine is bearing fruit in another way - in future issues we will be publishing more fiction and poetry from some of the original *Weird Tales* writers. We have on hand new fiction and reprints, old hands and new authors, and the creative talents of our illustrators to provide you with what we regard as an exciting 1979 for *Fantasy Tales*. We look forward to your continued support and hope that some of you will be urged into sending us your Letters of Comment on the magazine. On this issue for example - how do you think we shape up?

MORE PAGES?

Mark Mansell, from La Puente, California, writes: "I've just read number 3, and the best story in the issue was *The Lean Wolves Wait* by John Wysocki. A very interesting tale. I've read all three of Wysocki's works in *Weirdbook* and *Roadstool Wine*, and this shows his continual improvement as a writer. I thought Mr. Connolly's tale *At the End of the Road* a little too long and difficult to get through easily.

At first it was even as difficult to understand as one of Robert Aickman's tales, which I don't care much for I'm afraid, but the ending was an improvement over Aickman by making the story clearer in hindsight, at least. Personally, I prefer my science fiction and my fantasy/horror on separate plates at the table, so Andrew Darlington's tale didn't thrill me too much. *The Inheritance* by Denys Val Baker was an excellently crafted tale, building up to an eerie ending. It was, however, a reprint from a readily available Arkham House volume, and it would have been better to have printed something new. A new Lumley or Campbell or Cole, or some other British or American practitioner of the genre. *The Exhumation* by Peter Coleborn was a decidedly gruesome little tale, and I loved the slight collision between ancient horror (the vampire) and modern horror (the terrorist and his bomb). The poems weren't bad, although *A Sonnet for Insanity* wasn't to my taste, but I'm not much of an expert on poetry to make judgements of that sort. *Fantasy Tales* is an idea whose time is come. If you can avoid leaning too far into either the horror or sword and sorcery camps, and try for a balance between the two, instead, then you will most likely receive a well-deserved World Fantasy Award in the near future. I'm astounded at your getting those slick colour covers. They're nice, but you might find it more economical to go for regular black and white covers. You might even be able to expand your page-count and your frequency of appearance by the change-over. *Whispers*, *Weirdbook* and others of their kind have managed to gain large followings without going overboard on the packaging. Stick to the tried and true maxim: "It's what goes on the paper, not the paper itself, that's important." I'm looking forward to seeing many more of *Fantasy Tales*. I hope that it's a huge success and that it can come out quarterly."

SPLENDID VISUAL APPEAL

From, Pat McIntosh-Spinnler, writer of last issue's poem, *Berúthiel* and the 'Thula' adventures: "The

zine looks splendid: layout, printing and illustrations all of the higher-than-professional standard that only the really good amateur zines can afford. (Professionals, after all, don't have the time to consider all the niceties.) I thought the visual appeal was splendid. On the fiction I am less willing to comment: I dislike the vampire/possession/supernatural horror genre and probably can't judge it fairly. But Darlington's *The Last Sleeping God of Mars* is very good, a good idea well worked out and nicely written. I would like to know more about the hero and his universe. I was really chuffed to see the Jim Pitts illustration to my poem. Even such a little one is quite an honour - and the cats look like cats."

BETTER THAN NO.2

Brent Henshaw, of Coventry, writes: "I don't know how you did it but you did. *Fantasy Tales* 3 was even better than no.2. I liked all the stories, especially *The Lean Wolves Wait*. The art was much better than issues 1 and 2. David Lloyd's art was nothing short of brilliant. I don't agree with the people who said FT is as good as *Weird Tales*; FT is better than *Weird Tales*."

WEIRD TALES AGAIN?

Regular contributor and the author of this issue's lead story, Adrian Cole, writes from Bideford, Devon: "Was that Munch or Monty Python on the back? More of Ms. Starshine, please? *Fantasy Tales* is doing us all a great service in giving us a treat to read, and a chance to see newer writers emerging. Nowhere in the UK is there a market like this one...and it's about time the whole fantasy genre had a market like this. Damn good artwork, good yarns (polished as well as good pulp) - *Weird Tales* again? Why not? As a contributor I'm very glad to be a part of it. When I think of what WT lead too..."

NOT A BAD ISSUE

Cyril Simsa, of Muswell Avenue, London, writes: "*Fantasy Tales* 3

wasn't a bad issue (I think I preferred it to number 2), though I didn't like the cover this time. I also thought that making John Wysocki's piece your cover story was a mistake, since I considered it to be the poorest story in the issue (and though I learned aeons ago that you shouldn't judge a magazine by its cover story, there may well be a lot of people Out There who do). So why give Wysocki the cover, when there were some demonstrably better stories (like Patrick Connolly's or Andrew Darlington's) on hand?"

BEST SO FAR

From one of our regular illustrators, Alan Hunter, of Bourne-mouth: "Without doubt, your best issue so far, both for story content and interior art. From the evocative prose of *The Inheritance* to the wild fantasy of *The Last Sleeping God of Mars*, the stories covered a wide spectrum of entertainment, and each was excellent in its own way. My own choice of

best story is *The Lean Wolves Wait*, a little classic of a tale backed by some excellent art by David Lloyd. *At the End of the Road* ran a close second. The story I liked least was *The Exhumation*, partly because it lacked plot, reading more like the beginning of a longer story - one way that the film writers have not yet considered for reviving *Dracula*? But, as with all the yarns in the issue, it was well written and all too shudderingly convincing. The "supporting program" of poetry and *The Cauldron* was very acceptable, rounding out an excellent issue."

ARTISTS IN THIS ISSUE

Alan Hunter contributed the artwork for *Mourning of the Following Day*. The pencil sketch illustrating *Mausoleum* is by Hannes Bok (from the collection of Jeffrey Myers). Dave Carson illustrated *Tomb-Time*. The heading for the *Contents* page is by Jim Pitts and John Grandfield produced the heading for *The Cauldron*.

Tomb-Time

By STEVE ENG

MERLINDA died of grief
A dozen years ago,
A slave to her belief
Your love wouldn't slow.

Her passion only grew
In the clay and loam:
Merlinda calls you to
Try her mossy home.

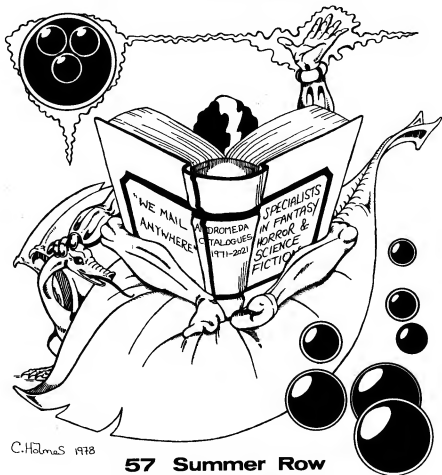
Merlinda beckons sweet
From the weed-grown gloom
Of her dirt-retreat:
Stone-marked, earth-lined room.

So go to her tonight,
Tear her rotted shroud
Away, and love her right,
Passionate and proud.



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